

## I'd forgotten people are kind

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# **I'd forgotten people are kind**

by [BialyLis](#)

## Summary

"Wilbur didn't look like a "difficult" child.

Honestly, he looked like a child struggling to reach his next birthday on his own. In an oversized, faded sweater, with bruises on his forearms, and a still unhealed, split lip, he definitely didn't resemble the little terrorist Phil had carefully guarded all sharp objects from. More like a victim of a natural disaster. As if he had spent hours on the roof escaping a flood, only to be carried away by a tornado.

But burying the knives was still a good idea. The kid seemed to trip over while making a sandwich."

Or: Phil feel ready to become a foster family.

Spoiler: He's not ready.

Less of plot and more of feelings. Also, fuck canon!Dadza! I want Phil to be a good dad!  
(Title from "Ready Now" by Dodie Clark)

# Chapter 1

Phil remembered the first time he had become a foster family.

He felt really well prepared: he took all possible courses, read a dozen books, spent a good week on the files of the new family member, trying to anticipate all the potential problems he would have to face. Even so, when Wilbur finally showed up at his house, real, material, and decidedly neglected, Phil was still surprised. He couldn't even define what exactly. Maybe it was that he was just expecting something different. After all, Wilbur had already gotten the label of a "difficult" child, and Phil, even though he knew it was stupid, expected him to be as stereotypical as possible about the trouble. He had expected screams, aggression and a complete lack of cooperation, so when he saw the boy for the first time, he wanted to say that there was a mistake.

Wilbur did not look like a "difficult" child. Honestly, he looked like a child struggling to reach his next birthday on his own. In an oversized, faded sweater, with bruises on his forearms, and a still unhealed, split lip, he definitely didn't resemble the little terrorist Phil had carefully guarded all sharp objects from. More like a victim of a natural disaster. As if he had spent hours on the roof escaping a flood, only to be carried away by a tornado. But burying the knives was still a good idea. The kid seemed to trip over while making a sandwich.

Phil tried very hard not to focus on the "little things." To see the bigger picture and a real, thinking and feeling child, not the billboard from a very sad social campaign. But it was damn hard for him, because Wilbur not only looked like a shadow of a man, but had obviously set himself the goal of literally becoming one. Apart from the silent "Good morning, sir", he didn't say a word, he moved practically silently, looking around the house as carefully as if he was already creating a detailed plan in 3D in his imagination and marking potential escape routes. And when the social worker finally decided to leave the newly formed family alone, for a second Wilbur looked as if he were seriously considering running and barricading himself in the car. Phil was so grateful that he didn't end up doing it. He felt the piercing, fearful gaze all too clearly on himself - he needed no more direct evidence that he wasn't a positive figure in the story at the moment.

He tried not to take it personally. He had a clearly scared child in his care now, and it was not time to wonder if it was a legitimate fear or not. Even though Wilbur flinched when Phil tried to put his hand on his shoulder and backed toward the door, suddenly breathing three times faster, and clutched his woefully empty bag to his chest, which would most likely hold his whole life, and my God, who hurt this child so bad, where can they be found, and how many years do you spend in prison for murder? Phil was sure that if he showed Wilbur's photo as evidence in the case, he would be acquitted immediately.

"Would you like to see your room?", he asked, making notes in his head. Don't make sudden movements, don't touch, don't think about murder. He quietly hoped that if he allowed the boy to calm down in some friendlier place, he might relax a little.

Wilbur didn't look as if he planned to calm down, but he nodded and allowed himself to be led up the stairs. At first, Phil wanted to let him go ahead, but after a second's thought, the last thing the baby needed was to be cornered with a stranger behind his back. He couldn't judge whether Wilbur appreciated his thought process. He was not at all sure if the boy was thinking about anything at that moment. His eyes screamed "run, run, run, run, run...!" but besides that, his face was completely indifferent.

"It's just me?", he made sure as Phil opened the correct door and gestured him inside. First real words! Three at once! Quite a full sentence! Maybe not very complex, but that's something.

"Just you," he confirmed, smiling as Wilbur looked around carefully and slowly, reverently, laid his bag down on the bed. In fact, he didn't have much to look at - a desk, an empty bookcase, and a wardrobe. "I know it's a little... a little empty," Phil cleared his throat, suddenly wishing he had tried to guess what a nine-year-old might be interested in. Knowing his luck, he would have shot badly, but at least you would have seen he was trying! "I had no idea what you like and if you have any hobbies..."

"It's okay, I like it a lot, thank you, sir" Wilbur put in, gasping out quickly and as if reading a script and afraid he would miss his dialogue. Phil resolved to pretend for the moment that it didn't bother him at all.

"It's empty" He repeated, raising an eyebrow. Wilbur looked down at the floor. "I thought it would be best if we went shopping tomorrow and you can choose the things you like. We need to buy you new clothes anyway. I have a few sets ready, but they probably won't be good for you."

To be sure, he looked the boy up again. He was tall for his age, but also way too thin. Phil hadn't gotten any information about the size he was wearing, so he shopped blindly and relied on the help of a cashier who was more familiar with what an "average" nine-year-old should wear. Wilbur, unfortunately, turned out to be very little of "average". Some of the shirts will probably still fit him, but the pants can be a bigger problem. It would be nice to visit the hairdresser as well, because his dark hair was beginning to fall over his eyes, and while it looked cute, it couldn't be very comfortable.

"So?" He asked when he got no reaction. Wilbur looked up and blinked, clearly distracted from some deep thoughts. Phil could practically see him analyzing the situation in his head and trying to guess what the correct answer was, panic growing in him every second.

"Shopping. Tomorrow. What do you think?"

The boy relaxed his shoulders a bit.

"Oh. It's... Yes" He nodded slowly, then quickly added, "It's fine, sir."

It took Phil a lot of effort not to frown.

"You can call me Phil. I don't like being called "sir", I'm not that old."

If Wilbur was surprised, he hid it very well.

"Phil," he just repeated, as if he were getting used to the sound of the name.

The man grinned broadly.

"You can unpack if you want." He ignored the quiet thought that it would take the child exactly two seconds to empty the bag. It is not time to wonder "why", it's time to act to change things. "I'll be downstairs if you need anything. You can come down to me if you like, but if you prefer to be alone for a while, I'll call you to dinner in... I think an hour?" Wilbur nodded. Phil didn't even have to ask which option he chose. "The bathroom is directly opposite. I have prepared towels and a toothbrush for you, the rest are in the cupboard under the sink.

Wilbur nodded again. Phil tried to reassure himself that it could be worse. He could communicate by blinking morse code or by smoke signs. At this point, he wouldn't even be surprised anymore.

He hesitated, but knelt in front of the boy so that their faces were on the same level. He tried to do it slowly, and to some extent he seems to have succeeded, because Wilbur flinched but didn't back away. Phil graded himself a strong C - for good intentions.

"If you just need anything, *anything*, don't be afraid to say it, okay?" He tried to sound confident but not intrusive. As if he really knew what he was doing and was ready for any eventuality. In fact, he neither knew nor was ready, but details, details...

"It's fine, sir... Phil."

The man sighed silently. He felt so it was not going to be easy.

"I want you to feel safe here, Wilbur, and I'll do my best to keep it that way, but sometimes I might accidentally do something that..." *...will touch some very delicate chord from your past and make you put traumatic memories on me and goodbye, positive relationship, you were never even here!* "Something, that may be upsetting for you. If something like this happens, I'd like you to tell me about it. Even if it is something small. Alright?"

"It's..."

"Wilbur." Phil looked the boy straight in the eye. "*Alright?*"

For several seconds, Wilbur watched him intently, clearly considering something. When he finally mumbled a quiet "Alright," Phil was absolutely convinced that he had failed to gain even one percent of his trust. Maybe something like a half of procent, maximum. But it was always a half in the right direction.

## Chapter 2

Phil wasn't surprised when Wilbur didn't come downstairs of his own free will. It also did not surprise him that when he opened the door to his room to call him to dinner, the boy sat stiffly upright on the bed, busy staring intensely at the wall. The silence at the table was actually predictable too, but Phil was slowly running out of comfort points. Especially since it took a good minute to stab potatoes with a fork that he realized the boy was still staring at the empty plate.

"You don't like stew?"

Wilbur shrugged.

"It's fine."

Phil concluded that at this stage he would have responded enthusiastically to any term stronger than "fine", no matter which direction of the scale. Anything that doesn't sound like a very polite "I don't give a fuck, mentally I'm not even here."

The boy still made no move to prevent starvation, so after a moment's hesitation Phil pushed the bowl of nico meat closer to him.

"Take some?"

Wilbur's face remained indifferent, but he clearly relaxed and reached for his food immediately, as if he had just unlocked the feature. Lamp removed, Sim may walk through door.

Phil should definitely take a break from gaming.

But speaking of that ...

"Why don't you tell me something about yourself?" he suggested, and Wilbur immediately froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. He carefully put down the cutlery and straightened, looking at the man with full concentration. Phil was getting the damn strong vibration of the job interview from him, and he didn't like it at all.

"I have asthma. I take medication and it's usually fine, but I can't be out in the rain for too long or when it's cold because I'm getting worse." He hesitated for a second, a shadow of fear crossing his face. "Do you like incense, sir?"

"Phil. And no, not really."

"Oh. Okay. Because it makes me sick sometimes. But if you... if you like, that's fine too."

Phil rolled his eyes.

"Yhm, you can always hold your breath for an hour or two," he joked, but stopped smiling immediately when Wilbur nodded quite seriously. "Hey, I'm just kidding. I know you are sick and the incense sticks are definitely not 'okay', you can get an asthma attack from them. I got an inhaler for you, but do you have a spare?" Wilbur shook his head. Phil silently cursed the system as such and each and every family of the kid before him. "Okay, remind me later to make an appointment for you to see a doctor. I wouldn't like you to die in the middle of the night. There would be a lot of paperwork. Until then, if you just feel bad, no matter where, when or why, you have to tell me, okay?"

The boy confirmed again, this time for the first time, giving the impression that he was really relieved. Phil couldn't tell whether he disliked the vision of painful death so much or the smell of incense. He was ready to believe both options. But he still hadn't learned anything he was actually asking.

"I've read your file", he began again, from a slightly different angle. The worse one, apparently, because Wilbur's eyes widened for a second in silent fear. "I know you've changed schools a lot lately and you've been absent a lot. But you've had some really great grades so far, and I think if we explain your situation carefully, they'll still get you into the next grade. If necessary, we can slowly find a tutor for you to slowly catch up with the material. It may sound silly, but I don't feel competent enough to take responsibility for your homework myself. I'm afraid I'm already in school regress."

Wilbur frowned.

"What does it mean?"

"That I can calculate your budget for next year, but I don't remember what the capital of Finland is."

Wilbur rocked his chair nervously.

"Helsinki", he replied softly enough that if Phil weren't so hungry for any verbal communication, he might have missed it.

"Really? Whoa, that's good to know. To be honest I wasn't sure if I hadn't made up that country."

Wilbur pressed his back tighter against the back of the chair, his cheeks flushed pink.

"It's in Europe. Next to Norway. They have a white and blue flag with a cross. And a lot of dots above the letters."

Phil couldn't help feeling kinda proud. Shit, the kiddo was smart!

"Do you like school, Wilbur?"

He had to wait a second too long for an answer to be believed.

"It's fine."

Phil raised the eyebrow.

"Do you like school or do you like studying?" he clarified, and the way Wilbur pursed his lips and stabbed a potato was more than enough for an answer. "Okay, so you like geography? Something else? Books? Films?" He waited a few seconds of silence just to get a shrug. "You know, I really want to do something together, but you have to give me some tips. I don't want you to get bored."

"Anything you choose, sir..."

"Phil."

"Oh. Sorry. Whatever you choose will be fine, Phil."

Shit, he was starting to really dislike that phrase...

"Do you like video games?"

Wilbur hesitated.

"Sometimes I watched others play. But I couldn't use the computer. I could break something."

"I dare say you would destroy your own life by playing and nothing else", he snorted. Wilbur probably didn't understand, because he just looked at him with an unspoken question. Another note: stop joking. "If you want, you can play together any day. I definitely have some games... good for kids."

He didn't. He definitely didn't. Shit, he needed to add that to the shopping list.

Wilbur did not look particularly enthusiastic.

"If you like, sir", he agreed, in the same tone Phil used when a client asked for some extremely idiotic and worthless revision on an assignment.

"Phil", he corrected again, smiling, the boy hadn't thought he was getting impatient. Judging by the way he curled his arms, he thought anyway.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it, I forgot. Because always..."

"It's okay," he interrupted quickly. "Slowly, there's no rush. You'll get used to it eventually."

Something about Wilbur's expression told him he truly doubted it, and at first Phil wondered if he should just let go. But then the right thought clicked in his head, and he realized that the boy wasn't worried about uprooting habits. He just doesn't believe that he will spend time in his house so that it makes any sense to adjust to the changes.

Phil considered this might be the case. Wilbur has been in foster homes since he was four and has passed seven so far. He spent a year in the first and three years in the second. In five next - a maximum of a month. Whatever happened was definitely no good.



Most of the families did not give any reasons for sending the child away. Or maybe it was just too confidential data for anyone to share with Phil. The social worker described the boy as "difficult" and "attentive", which was something more specific and in no way coincides with anything Phil had seen so far. And he didn't like it when practice didn't match theory.

Something was wrong, definitely.

For now, however, he had more important things to do with analyzing reality. Like that Wilbur yawned shrilly and pressed his back against the backrest, as if he had just blown out of air. Apparently, the meal and the stress did their job and worked as the ultimate sleeping aid. Phil honestly doubted he had slept even a minute last night. Not that he was much better himself.

"Tired?" The boy hesitated, but nodded. "I'm not surprised. That it must have been a stressful day." He looked at his watch. "How about if I show you the rest of the house and then take a bath and go to bed early? If we want to buy what we need tomorrow, we'll have another long day for everything.

Wilbur didn't answer, but got up from the table. He reached for Phil's plate, but Phil restrained him with a wave of his hand.

"Leave it and I'll take care of it."

This time he was sure - the boy was genuinely surprised. Still, he withdrew his hand and followed the man towards the kitchen.

"You can take whatever you want," Phil pointed to the cupboards, "but be careful with sharp objects, okay? Cereal are here, didn't see what you like, bought a few. Tomorrow you will show me which one you prefer. If you can't find something just, ask. Don't worry if you don't remember where you take something from, nothing has a permanent place here. I'm rather forgetful. And a thing I'm looking for is always in the last place I check. I have no idea how it happens."

He shook his head in silent disappointment with himself and turned to see if Wilbur wasn't overwhelmed by this overload of information. Immediately he felt an unpleasant cramp in his stomach, as the boy looked at him as if he were just lecturing in a completely foreign language on a topic he had never heard of.

"I can... take what I want?", he repeated slowly, as if he were almost sure he had heard something wrong.

Phil didn't like how disturbingly well this disbelief explained his thinness.

"Of course. That's what food is for", he assured him more seriously than he intended. "Just don't eat sweets before dinner. A healthy diet is more than pure sugar."

The corner of Wilbur's mouth rose slightly for the first time. Phil had no idea if it was the fact that he had finally made a joke or the receding vision of a hunger strike, but his heart grew a little lighter.

The tour around the house didn't take long, for the simple reason that there wasn't much to do. The upstairs guest rooms were disregarded by Wilbur, but Phil lingered a moment longer at the far end of the hall.

"This is my office. And this", he jerked a thumb at the door behind him, directly across from him, "is my bedroom. If you need anything, you can come see me at any time. Even if it's very late and you have to wake me up. Be warned, I sleep like a stone. I usually stay up late, work best in the evenings. But sometimes I chat with people via video chat, so let's make an arrangement to knock before you enter, okay?"

Wilbur nodded. Phil was pretty sure there was no "Of course, I understand, I will remember" nod but more like "I would sooner die in agony than come for help,". But temporarily he put the problem aside.

When Phil checked into his room two hours later, Wilbur was already asleep, curled up under the covers so tightly it seemed impossible to free himself from either of his limbs. Even while he was asleep, he looked tense and Phil could bet he would jump to any louder sound, instantly waking up and ready to run.

He wrote it down on his to-do list, he would have to work on. But not now. They had time for it. They had a lot, a lot of time for it, because God knows that a few hours with this child was enough to make him a point of honor to protect him from absolutely everyone.

The hardest part seemed to convince the child.

But slowly, in small steps.

## Chapter 3

Phil had no illusions that the task would be easy. If a child has trouble telling if he likes books or movies, it's hard to expect more cooperation when choosing... basically anything. Phil was ready for this, really, mentally getting ready all night, at breakfast and while driving, when Wilbur, when asked if he liked the song on the radio, replied, "It's fine". Everything was "fine". Everything he tried on was "fine", even that horrible sweater that scratched Phil from a distance and without touching. "A new lamp was "fine", notebooks, a set of pencils and even a desk pad with characters from some fairy tale. Wilbur couldn't say which one in particular, but it was definitely "fine". As an absolutely every game, book, and toy that Phil shoved under his nose with stubborn hope, only to immediately put them back in the basket with resignation.

Not that he'd prefer the boy to be picky but for God's sake...

They had walked around most of the alleys before frustration finally took over, and, ignoring that he was most likely blocking the way for others, he knelt down in front of the boy to catch up with him.

"Wilbur. Please listen to me carefully. We have to buy you some books or toys or whatever 'cause, I'll be honest, it really freaks me out whenever you sit and just stare at the wall. And since we are already buying something, it would be good if it was something you like at least a little. Please, kid, I'm begging you... Do you like this whole "Potter" thing or not?"

Wilbur shifted nervously, his fingers tightening around the sleeves of his sweater. From the moment he entered the store, he was obviously uncomfortable in a place full of strangers, and Phil immediately regretted the additional pressure he had put on him. Maybe he should plan it a little better. Or buy things online like any normal person. But noooo, he felt like driving his car through half the city, traumatizing a child and experiencing an internal crisis in the least private place possible.

"It's fine", the boy finally muttered, shuffling his shoes on the floor.

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, mentally counted to ten, and sighed heavily. When he opened his eyes again, Wilbur was staring at him anxiously: his shoulders were tucked up, his lips tightened, and he looked twice as small as he really was.

Great. Fucking great. Now the kid thought he had done something wrong. Well done Phil, you are the best father in the world!

He tossed the first three volumes of Harry Potter into the basket along with possibly, maybe, potentially good sources of entertainment for the children, and straightened up, feeling both five times more resigned and ten times more determined. There had to be something to get any emotion from Wilbur, at least one thing he really wanted to get, and God knows Phil was going to find it, even if it took him all day!

Enlightenment came suddenly and from a completely unexpected side as they went back to the school department for a new backpack. If Phil had been a little less watchful, he would have missed the way Wilbur froze for a second, the way his eyes widened and flashed before he quickly looked away. But Phil was watchful. Watchful, determined, and obviously stupid, because how had he not thought about it sooner?

In the aisle between the shelves, packed in a large cardboard box, were maps.

Phil reached for one of them, practically feeling the boy's eyes on him.

"You like geography, right?", he made sure, turning the poster over in his hands. "We could hang it over your desk. I think it will fit perfectly. Or we could cut out the North Pole, I've always preferred the Arctic anyway. What do you think?"

Wilbur looked downright painfully torn as he looked from the floor to his hands, to the map and back to the floor, and for a second Phil thought he had done something wrong, misread the signals, misspelled words...

"It's fi-"

Oh, fuck it.

"Wilbur, *I can see* you like it." It took a lot of effort to keep this voice at a sufficiently neutral level. "You can just admit it. If you like something, just say it."

He had serious doubts as to whether he should say such a thing. He really planned to give the child all the time and space they needed, whether it was something serious or as banal as shopping. He knew that sometimes it was better to let go, that Wilbur didn't trust him, that he had absolutely no reason to trust him at all, and it would probably be a long time before he felt safe with him. That he is not doing it on purpose or maliciously and is only trying to defend himself from possible harm. He hadn't stayed more than a month in any of the last five houses - he had no reason to trust it would be any different this time.

Phil *knew* all this and he really, really understood. He *was trying* to understand. But he was as confused as the kid before him, and he needed a clue as to what he should do. Any sign that he hasn't broke anything yet.

Maybe Wilbur sensed his desperation. Maybe he caught the silent request and decided to risk it once, on a trial basis. Maybe he had found a remnant of faith within himself and decided it was now or never. Or maybe he just really liked maps. But after a long moment of fighting with himself he finally nodded.

"Can I... Can I really have one?"

If Phil were a believer, he would thank God for an act of grace. Any god and all of them at once.

"Really. Definitely."

All the way home, Wilbur kept the map pressed to his chest as a most precious treasure, and Phil wasn't entirely sure if it was more of a touching or a heartbreaking scene. Has no one ever given him anything nice before?

Ten minutes later, as he pulled up in front of McDrive, he realized that apparently not.

"We'll get some food while we're here."

He pointed in the right direction, and Wilbur looked away from his new treasure for a full two seconds to peek out the window. He opened his mouth and Phil knew, he just knew what he was going to say and he hated how tired he felt. But then the boy pursed his lips, nervously rubbing one foot against the other for a moment, until the end mumbled "Okay." Phil never thought he would be so happy to move from two words to one.

"What would you like?"

Wilbur blinked.

"Oh. For... for me too?"

Phil shouldn't be surprised, and he probably wasn't by this point.

He just had to remember that it was wrong to murder a few people.

Wilbur never ate fast food. He didn't have to say it, the way he stared at his Happy Meal set was enough and the shocked expression on his face when he found out there should be a toy inside too.

*"In food?!"*

Phil laughed as he glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

"Somewhere around. I hope. Go ahead", he encouraged when the child still hadn't even opened it. "Before it gets cold. There is absolutely nothing worse than cold fries."

Wilbur still looked like he was unlocking a bomb. Phil would have found it quite amusing if he had not already realized that the boy had really disturbing food approach. As if he didn't expect to get any of food, to be more specific.

He shifted his gaze to the road, trying to focus on something more pleasant. He couldn't change the past, whatever it was, but Wilbur seemed happy to sit in the back seat with a map in one hand and a box of chips in the other. Phil was going to make sure it stayed that way.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Thanks a lot for all nice comments! They give me a lot of motivation.  
This chapter is longer than the previous one. I tried to make the chapters of similar length but failed.

Getting to know Wilbur was like a very harsh version of an Advent calendar - each day Phil opened another door only to discover a new trauma. When he least expected it.

Like when he asked if he could throw away that horrible sweater Wilbur was wearing on the first day. And on the second day. And also on the third day... Phil has always been of the opinion that you should just let children choose clothes they want to wear, but when he saw the same outfit again, he felt compelled to intervene.

"You don't like your other clothes?"

Wilbur shrugged.

"I have no other clothes."

It took Phil a few seconds of vigorous stirring of the coffee to analyze each word and confirm that no, he hadn't missed anything. The sentence just didn't make sense.

"Literally yesterday we bought half of the store. It's impossible that everything suddenly doesn't fit you. I know children grow, but not that fast."

Wilbur pressed his back against the backrest, and only then did Phil realize his plate was still empty.

"Eat," he ordered, not even trying to ask why. For some reason, Wilbur never started a meal until he got a straight command. Phil preferred not to think too much about it. "You don't like any of your new stuff?"

The boy swayed nervously in his chair, concentrating on making the sandwich as neatly as if he were planning to put it on some contest. Clearly he tried to keep silent, but his nerves were too weak for that, and Phil was way too patient.

"The clothes can get dirty..." he finally muttered, more to his plate than to anyone else.

Phil had a strange feeling that he was starting to lose plot.

"That's why someone invented the washing machine. And probably also for the money, but let's stay with the first."

Wilbur pursed his lips.

"What if I wear them out?"

Now Phil was sure that not only had he lost the plot, he had never really known it. Wilbur evidently saw a different, deeper bottom in this conversation.

Phil hesitated. He didn't like playing games whose rules he didn't know.

"Like... on purpose?" He asked. Wilbur looked so horrified that it was more than enough for an answer. "Then that's okay. Accidents can happen". He frowned. "Were you afraid that I would punish you if you get your clothes dirty?" He got a short nod in response and felt like a bad person immediately. "Hey kiddo, come on. Things get dirty sometimes. On average, I burn my shirt with an iron once a week. It happens. But speaking of dirty... I really don't think it can be washed off." He pointed the sweater the boy was wearing. "I'm not sure if it will survive in the washing machine at all. If you really like it, next time we can look for a similar one... Wilbur." He sighed heavily, seeing the boy just shake his head, more and more panicked. "Please, just go and get changed, okay?"

For a second, Wilbur looked like a robot given conflicting orders - clearly torn between the urge to obey and protest.

"But you won't throw it out?"

In other time, Phil would be genuinely happy that the child begins to some degree of extremes with his own opinion. Alleluja, let us praise the Lord! But he was pretty sure it wasn't sentiment, sure that Wilbur hated that damn sweater just as much as he did. It was about something different, something more important, and he was determined to discover what.

"It's really used. And way too big for you."

"But it's mine."

"Wilbur, it's just an old sweater."

"But it's *mine*!"

"Same as fifteen others in your closet."

"But only while I'm here!"

It wasn't a scream. Not the way Phil was prepared for and expected. There was no anger in him, only despair and regret and a very, very soft plea.

Phil had never heard anything like it before.

"Wilbur..."

The boy cringed, hugging himself.

"This one is *mine*. I need it when... " He pressed his lips together, his chin quivering. "I need it for later."

Phil took a deep breath and held his breath for a long moment, as if he could stop the entire universe with that. It has long been known that he will have to have this conversation. He was reading about it, getting ready, he had several monologues prepared, depending on which pattern the conversation would follow. He felt ready when he had a nondescript child in front of him in his mind, but as he looked at Wilbur, so real and alive in front of him, suddenly all the words sounded too banal.

"I'm not going to send you back," he said simply, painfully aware that he wouldn't believed it for himself.

The boy sniffed loudly, but when he looked up, his face was expressionless.

"It's fine," he replied in a low, indifferent voice.

"Wilbur..."

"I'll get changed."

Phil was sane enough not trying to stop him.

\* \* \*

The second big unexpected discovery was neither big nor really unexpected. Or at least it wouldn't be, if Phil hadn't made it a point of honor to be completely ignorant. He could convince himself that he was just trying to be positive about the world and trying not to assume the worst right away and some nonsense about seeing only good in people. In fact, he was a goddamn coward. If you close your eyes, plug your ears and repeat a million times, the problem will... No, it probably won't go away. But it will grow enough to disturb others as well and will eventually be taken care of by someone else.

Phil practiced this strategy through all his life, and he couldn't say he got off badly. The only difference was that his life made him alone, he was only responsible for himself, and if he screwed up, no one else felt harmed. Now he had a child in his care. Damn good reason to finally pull yourself together.

And yet Phil still pretended. He pretended not to see the way Wilbur flinched at every louder noise, how he ran away from physical contact, how bruises on his forearms only start to turn yellow and pale. He pretended not to spend any time at the door to the boy's room, hearing



his soft, muffled cry, and trying to force himself to press the doorknob. That he couldn't see how red and swollen Wilbur's eyes were in the morning.

He didn't want to see it. It was easier not to see. Don't think too much about it. He already felt helpless enough.

He doesn't really know why he asked about it. Maybe it was a flash of common sense. Maybe a form of sabotage. Or maybe he was just sleepy and did not fully think about what he was saying.

"Are you religious?" he asked during lunch, when the boy, as usual, didn't even try to reach for his food, clearly waiting for permission. "You know, I've never been particularly religious myself, but if you need... I don't know, to pray before meals or something, that's no problem. You shouldn't be ashamed of it."

Wilbur's eyes widened, he opened his mouth, but just as quickly he closed it and shook his head.

"I don't know any prayer." He suddenly looked almost scared. "Should I know one? I can learn if you want."

"No no no no!" Phil shook his head quickly, trying to calm him down. "You don't have to learn anything, I just wanted to know. I thought that maybe that's why..." He tried to find a softest term, but he found out whatever he choose, it will be wrong in one of a million ways. "Why you have, like, eating problems."

Wilbur looked at him with as sincere astonishment as never before.

"I have no problems with eating."

Well, there was a lot of truth to that. Once he started, he could empty his plate in three seconds, as if afraid someone might take it from him.

*Don't think too much about it, don't think too much about it...*

"I mean..." Phil made an undefined motion with his hand, and seeing the disorientation in the boy's eyes slowly grow, he sighed heavily. Sometimes you have to give up and accept failure. He was clearly not meant to be subtle. "Wilbur, listen. You really don't have to wait for me to let you eat, okay? It's not that it annoys me" he add quickly "but it's a bit... I don't understand why you're doing this?"

He expected Wilbur to try to back off immediately, he would look away and start squirming in the chair as always when something stressed him out. But he seemed completely calm, perhaps a little surprised, but certainly not on the verge of escaping.

For some reason, it was even more disturbing.

"How else do I know if you're mad at me?"

Phil didn't answer right away. Not because he actually considered the hint. He just hung on a question and took a few seconds to digest it.

"Wilbur..." he began, but immediately fell silent a second time. Never in his life had anyone asked him questions about so many problems at once. He didn't even know which one he should mention first! "Wilbur. Could you- " Damn, choosing words has never felt so hard for him. "Could you explain to me why being angry with you would mean...?" Fuck it. "Wilbur, you didn't get *any* food if someone was angry with you?"

Wow. Subtlety at its best. Great job Phil. That's why no one comes to you for comforting.

Wilbur looked away.

"Sometimes," he muttered, and on the first impulse Phil was glad he at least was aware of his own trauma. And then he let out a curse in his mind, because of course he wasn't. He was a child. He was ashamed that he did something wrong and now he had reproaches for it!

Okay. Slowly. You have to play it right.

"How often "sometimes" happened?"

The boy bit his lip.

"I wasn't doing anything on purpose," he said. "I just... Sometimes I was too loud, or I didn't do something on time, or I broke something, or..."

Phil silenced him with a single gesture.

"How often, Wilbur?"

Now he was sure - the kid was not only ashamed that he 'had' to be punished at all, but he was also clearly afraid that he would lose in his new guardian eyes because of it.

"Very often," he finally admitted.

Phil was starting to think that if God didn't want him to murder someone, he wouldn't let him meet this kid.

"Okay." He closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his fingers at his temple. "Okay, that's... Very, very *not okay*. I have a lot to say about this parenting method, but some of it is very obscene and you shouldn't hear that... I- I need a moment to figure it out."

He took a deep breath, hiding his face in his hands for a second, trying to calm himself down, but when he looked at the child again, he realized that he have only made it worse. While earlier Wilbur had seemed utterly reconciled to the rules that had been instilled in him, now he clearly had no idea what was going on and, of course, began to feels guilty. Phil never signed up for this. He was going to have a "problematic" child in his care - "problematic" like *"I'm having trouble keeping him in check"* not *"Keeping faith in humanity becomes an issue"*. He sighed heavily.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. It's just..." Sick. Abnormal. Absolutely unacceptable. Why did he have the strange feeling the boy would not understand? "Why would I even make you sit at the table if I didn't want you to eat?"

So much good that Wilbur still didn't seem to notice with how delicate the material they were working right now. Good. Very good. Phil just had to get that bomb from him before it exploded and everyone would be safe...

"The family always sits down at the table together." The boy's voice was dry and indifferent, as if he were quoting from memory a principle he had heard far too often. "If you don't deserve it," he shrugged, "you just don't eat."

Oh. So it fucking exploded.

Phil has never been a fan of using food as a form of punishment. Taking sweets from your child? Okay, maybe, possibly. Sending back to bed without dinner? A big, firm "No". Basic needs were not called that for nothing! What's next? No breathing? Exit to the bathroom only with permission? No wait, didn't the schools already practice the latter? Is it still possible to switch to homeschooling? Focus Phil, focus!

Going to the punch line - he was never a particular fan. But forcing a child to sit at the table and watch everyone else eat... He believed that there are limits to being a shitty person. Humanity has once again decided to disappoint him greatly.

If Phil hadn't know Wilbur for a while, he would have excused himself, shut himself up in the bedroom, and smashed something very large and very glass. Unfortunately, he had a hunch that the very first point of this would lead the child to the brink of hysteria, so he just mentally counted to ten. Three times. And from the end.

It didn't make him feel much better, but he couldn't devote the rest of his life to analyzing the meaning of life in such shitty world, and the broadly understood morality did not allow him to remain silent about the whole situation. Which, apparently, Wilbur has yet to come into contact with.

Slowly, very slowly, so that the boy had his hand in the search all the time, he reached over the table, covering his hand with boy's.

"We're not doing anything like that in this house, okay?", he said, trying to sound the softest. Wilbur nodded, quite automatically, never taking his eyes off their clasped hands. It was hard to judge what surprised him the most - that someone touched him or that he allowed to that. Phil smothered the needing to just hug him. "I'm very serious. There is absolutely no reason why I should want you to be hungry."

Wilbur looked him straight in the eye for the first time.

"What if I do something wrong?"

"Food is not a prize, Wilbur. You don't have to deserve it or anything like that. It's my goddamn responsibility to make sure you're not hungry. Do you understand me? Wilbur?"

The boy hesitated, but finally nodded.

"I understand."

He definitely didn't understand, but Phil didn't even dare to dream that he could manage the years of violence with one monologue. Still, he to smile and squeeze the boy's fingers a little tighter before withdrawing his hand.

"That's good. I am glad you do."

They sat in silence for a moment, Phil trying to pretend he hadn't lost his appetite at all, Wilbur chewing on each piece of his sandwich to the point where he had to gnaw the air. Phil could almost hear the invisible gears spinning in his head, trying to combine facts and analysis of everything that just happened. He could also indicate the moment when they failed.

Wilbur almost threw the leftovers of sandwiche on the plate.

"You're angry," it was more of a statement than a question. There was desperation in his voice.

When you experience only one pattern all your life, each change seams dangerous, like some new form of the same game, the finale of which will sooner or later hurt you in the old way. Phil might have wanted to change it, he might have wished with all his heart it had been different, but the fact was he couldn't snap his fingers and magically fix reality. He couldn't erase the past and cover the traces it left behind. All he could do is be patient and try, try, keep trying until Wilbur finally believes that there is no hidden bottom, that Phil really isn't going to hurt him and won't let anyone else do so.

"I'm not angry." Oh, he was so fucking angry... "Not at you. I'm... I'm furious, because someone hurt you. You didn't deserve what happened to you."

Wilbur's chin quivered. He lowered his head and stared at his plate as intensely as if he were trying to smash it by sheer willpower. But just as Phil was beginning to expect a breakthrough, the boy suddenly muttered:

"Can I go to my room?"

Phil didn't have the heart to say no to him.

He also didn't have the heart of trying to force him to do anything, when a few hours later he knocked on the door asking if he wanted to come down to dinner and was given a short "No thanks." He had left the plate of sandwiches on the table next to him, but he had little hopes for it, so he breathed a sigh of relief when he noticed the loss of food some time later. Maybe this day was not entirely lost and he achieved something. He tried to stick to that thought, working on the computer. He couldn't focus at all.

He made the right decision, right? He gave Wilbur a moment to think things over when he needed it, it's perfectly normal, everyone has moments like this sometimes. Following him

and forcing him to discuss it felt wrong, like invading his privacy and putting pressure on him, but Phil couldn't shake the thought that he had somehow failed as a parent. He let the child sit completely alone, right after he threw a whole lot of information at him and tried to refute everything he had been taught. And even when it comes to help, even if he knew he was objectively right, it doesn't change the fact that Wilbur didn't know that. Phil was a complete stranger to him, who popped into his life out of nowhere and for a few days changed the game that started years ago.

He must have felt sooo confident and safe now. For fucking sure.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Hi, I'm here to say that I'm Tommy apologist and If anything bad happen to my boy tomorrow, I will kill everybody in this fandom and then myself.

✨Have fun! ✨

It was almost two in the morning, when Phil was ready to admitt to himself that there was no point in tormenting the computer, since his thoughts were farthest away anyway. Being a very sensible person, he would go to the kitchen for another cup of coffee (you can't break your sleep schedule if you don't have one at all!) and almost paid for insomnia with a heart attack. He jumped when he turned on the light and saw a tiny figure in the back, but somehow managed not to drop the empty cup.

"God, kiddo! Do you want to kill me? Why didn't you turn on the light?"

Wilbur didn't answer, frozen in place like a deer staring into the headlights of a car. His chest rose and fell faster then it should have been, and his hands clutching a glass began to tremble.

"I just wanted a drink," he finally stuttered, his tone apologetic, as if he had been caught at least in a murder. "I didn't want to wake you up, sorry, I'll be quiet now, really, I promise...!"

He spit out the words faster and faster, and Phil instinctively raised his hands to calm him down. The effect was, unfortunately, quite the opposite, and the boy cringed, scared.

If Phil wanted to continue to delude himself that he was only oversensitive, he had just lost that opportunity. Wilbur has clearly been beaten in the past. And it didn't happened once or twice, or even three times. He was beaten frequently and, apparently, for absolutely everything.

Phil suppressed his anger and stepped back to give the child some more space.

"Hey, nothing happened. If you start to be even quieter... Can you be negatively loud? You know, like, minus five decibels...?" He shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Anyway, I wasn't sleeping anyway. Even so, you have every right to come and have a drink at any time."

Wilbur looked not entirely convinced, but he clearly relaxed. He didn't move away as Phil walked over to the sink to put the cup down, which was a small success in itself.

"You couldn't sleep?" A shrug. "Bad dream?"

Wilbur inhaled sharply and held his breath a good few seconds before nodding very slowly.

"Oh. Do you want to tell me about it?" He already knew the answer, but was pleasantly surprised that the boy hesitated before refusing. Little steps, little steps... "You know what always helps me sleep? Hot chocolate. What do you think?"

Wilbur shuffled his bare feet nervously across the dance floor.

"No, it's fine, thank you."

"Well, and I think it's not 'fine'. It will bother me if you can't sleep.

Wilbur bit his lip.

"Sorry..."

Phil, busy pouring milk into the pot, almost spilled it on the counter.

"For what?", he asked, genuinely surprised. What didn't surprise him at all is that he didn't get an answer. "Hey kiddo, calm down. Nothing happens. You don't have to be ashamed or anything, it happens sometimes. Everyone has bad dreams. Once I had a dream that I was killed by zombies. It was so real, I swear I sat for a good five minutes before it dawned on me that zombies doesn't exist. And then I went to the bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror and thought, "Oh. And there's one..."."

If Phil had a little more sense, maybe he would have considered the decision to let the nine-year-old be up at two in the morning. He was pretty sure all the books said something about making good habits and how that has a positive effect on kid's health. Fortunately, he didn't care at all. Otherwise, he might feel bad about how well he felt sitting with Wilbur on the couch in the living room, silently drinking chocolate, with the boy melting more and more into the back of the couch. He yawned and Phil laughed, but the merriment passed quickly as the boy raised his hand to rub his eyes, and his shirt sleeve slid off, revealing fading bruises. A few of them, right next to the wrist, were undoubtedly caused when someone's palm had tightened too tightly on it for too long.

Wilbur felt his eyesight followed him, and immediately pulled up his sleeve.

"Sorry," he gasped as he pulled his knees higher and pressed the cup tightly to his chest. Phil felt his stomach twist at the thought that he was most likely afraid to get hit for destroying the couch.

"Don't apologize," he asked more than he commended. He was too distraught for the moment, he took it too much personally when the child was clearly afraid of him. "You did nothing wrong, really, believe me."

Wilbur rubbed one bare foot against the other.

"Then why... why do I have them?"

Phil wasn't sure how to answer. He knew how he wanted to answer, but suspected that repeating the same thing over and over won't help much. He only had words at his disposal, while over the years, Wilbur saw very physical evidence that said something else entirely. He

needed time. He had to earn boy's trust before his opinion could matter. He knew it, he understood it, but still... He still wanted to do more.

"Let me show you something, okay?" He waited a moment before the boy nodded, then rolling up the sleeve of his own shirt. Just above the elbow was a long, light scar. Phil ran his fingers over it. "I have a few more. When I was young, there was an accident. It was winter, there was a lot of ice on the road, our car skidded and hit a tree."

Wilbur's eyes widened in silent shock.

"Did it hurt?" he asked quietly, probably reflexively and completely without thinking, because immediately after that he put his hand over mouth and made a face as if he wanted to swallow his own tongue.

Phil tilted his head back, resting his back against the couch. He didn't remember the accident itself, nor the stay in the hospital after. In fact, he wasn't sure how he had existed for several months. All the memories of that period were wrapped in a thick fog that he never dared to enter it.

"Yhm. Like hell", he nodded, though knowing Wilbur was asking about a completely different kind of pain. He lowered his shirt sleeve, mostly to find something to do with hands, even if for a second. "And, you know, after that... For a long time I thought it was my fault."

He didn't even have to look at the boy; he could feel his intense gaze, and hear the question even before it was spoken.

"Why?"

Phil closed his eyes for a moment.

There was no one reason. Just hundreds of little, inconspicuous things that he could and couldn't do and somehow that was even worse. As if the world were giving him warning signs which he stubbornly ignored that night.

It was dark. And slippery. Everyone was tired.

But he just wanted to go home and he couldn't *he couldn't know* that he would lose this home soon.

He opened his eyes and for several long seconds he just stared at the ceiling.

"Because I didn't want to understand that... that sometimes bad things happens for no reason. Sometimes it's easiest to blame ourselves and think that we've done something wrong to deserve all of this. Because then you can just promise that you will never do it again and that you will always be good, and then nothing so terrible will happen to you ever again. Nobody will hurt you if you don't give them a reason. But the world doesn't work that way, Wilbur. There are accidents, and there are people who hurt you just because they can, because they want to hurt you. And you can be the best version of yourself, you can be good, but they always find some reason anyway. You're a good kid, Wilbur." He smiled, trying to put so



much warmth into these words, so much confidence that the boy would actually believed them. "You are smart and kind and I can see it after a few days, so if someone couldn't see it... they simply didn't want to and didn't look for it."

He wasn't sure exactly what reaction he was looking for, but he was definitely looking for something. He hadn't expected Wilbur to agree with him, he wasn't that naive, but maybe a glimmer of understanding, or even confusion, meaning that the child was trying to process what he had just heard. But Wilbur didn't say a word, and although his eyes glazed visibly and his hands into fists, his face his face stained indifferent as he turned and rested his cheek on his bent knees.

It took a minute, five, finally ten minutes, before Phil realized his breathing was deeper and calmer. Another two minutes, the muscles relaxed and the boy's body pressed sideways against the back of the couch. A dozen or so seconds and Phil managed to take cup out of his hands and put it back on the table. When he looked again, Wilbur was already asleep, his face pressed against the pillow. For the first time since meeting him, he looked as calm as a child should look, and Phil felt a pain in his heart at the thought that as soon as he woke up he would immediately return to his nervous gaze and tense arms and sneaking around the house so quietly. He hesitated, but finally reached for a blanket lying on one of the armchairs and very carefully placed it over the boy. Something told him that if he flinched at every possibility of being touched, it might not be a particularly good idea to try to move him to bed. He had left the kitchen light on, in case Wilbur woke up at night and wasn't sure where he was.

Phil was pretty sure he wouldn't fall asleep himself. Common sense dictated that he did everything he could. His heart reproached him for not trying enough.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

### DREAM IS GONE

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil believed everything was going well. Okay, maybe Wilbur was still hesitating before reaching for his food, and okay, maybe they never got back to talk about his bruises again, and okay, maybe they didn't bring up serious topics at all, but still - it was better. They spent more and more time together, they got to know each other, the boy began to compose compound sentences, sometimes more than one at a time... What more could he ask for?

Phil even managed to convince him that he wouldn't destroy the computer by just breathing in its direction, and even if he somehow managed to do it, no one would make a tragedy about it. Wilbur turned out to be... objectively, absolutely hopeless in car racing games and was over the railing faster than back on track.

"You're doing great," Phil praised him, making a mental note in his head to never let him get a driver's license. "If you practice a little more, you will definitely reach the finish line!" It would have sounded less sarcastic if their car hadn't picked that moment to roll across the track and crash into another car. "Well... That was close one..."

Wilbur turned away, hid his face in his shoulder, and for a second the man feared he was felt sad. But then the boy looked up at him, and Phil realized he was laughing.

"You're funny."

Phil replied with an equally broad smile, completely reflexive and without a second's hesitation. He had never felt so happy about a compliment in his life. And he probably never considered that he should praise Wilbur more often.

"Well done," he tried that same afternoon, when Wilbur was helping him to weed the garden. They didn't have much to do, Phil wasn't a huge fan of gardening, all he wanted was a few carrots and fresh strawberries in the summer. Something that would force him to spend some time outdoors, but didn't require skills he just didn't have. "You will be the perfect helper."

Wilbur froze with a spatula in one hand and a clod of dirt in the other.

"Hey, hey! Don't eat sand!"

The boy flinched out of a trance.

"I didn't eat sand," he snorted, and then looked at Phil vigilantly to make sure he wouldn't be scolded for 'the tone'. "I can take care of garden if you want."

"I wouldn't say that it needs to be "taken care" in some way. It'll be nice if you help me here sometimes, but it's not your responsibility."

Wilbur frowned.

"Oh. Then what should I do?"

Phil suspected there was some secret answer that needed to be given to make the boy satisfied.

"Wash the carrots so we can eat them."

"But at home."

Yes, definitely a secret answer. Which, apparently, he still hadn't guessed.

"Live here?" risked. The child looked at him in such a way as if only respecting his old age was stopping him from calling him an idiot. Well, he definitely felt like an idiot. Especially a second later, when he finally understood what it was about. "Oh, are you asking about some chores or something? Honestly, I didn't think about it... Let's make an deal that I will not enter your room without asking, but you will keep it clean. I don't want to accidentally throw away something important. And if you grow an alien life under your bed, you will have to feed it and take it for walks yourself. What do you think?"

Wilbur shrugged.

"If you say so..." he muttered, going back to picking carrots. There was disbelief in his voice, but also a ton of relief.

"I say so. But speaking of duties..." Phil brushed the dirt off his hands and turned to the boy. "I spoke to the principal of the new school. If you feel up to it, you can start on Monday."

Wilbur bit his lip and Phil could bet he was counting hard just how many days left before Day Zero.

"Okay," he nodded, this time much, much more quietly and definitely unenthusiastically.

"For sure? I can try to negotiate a little more."

"No, it's fine," he said quickly, but Phil had already managed to get his hands shaking.

"Hey kiddo." He reached for his hand, squeezing lightly. Wilbur sucked in a breath but didn't back away. "It's okay if you're stressed. I would be surprised if you weren't"

The boy pursed his lips as he stared at their joined hands. For a second Phil could bet his fingers twitched, as if he wanted to return the hug, but at the last moment he gave up and instead pulled his hand back, pressing it tightly against his chest.

"Can I go home?"

Deep down, Phil sighed very, very heavy.

"Sure. But Wilbur." The boy stopped in a half-step. "It's okay if you want to be alone. But if you want to talk about something, anything, or if you just want to spend time with me... just say it. Okay?"

He couldn't see his face, but the way Wilbur pulled his arms down, Phil could imagine a face he made.

"Okay."

Phil knew it's not good. Not as good as he would like it to be. But it was still *better*, and that was all that mattered. They were going in the right direction.

\* \* \*

They weren't going in the right direction.

He should have been foresight. When you open an Advent Calendar, the last door always has the biggest surprise. He could have predicted that it would be the same with Wilbur, he was getting signs on all sides, but for some reasons he ignored them all. He ignored the red eyes at breakfast on Friday, ignored the lack of appetite on Saturday and the fact that he had heard maybe three sentences from the boy all through Sunday. Ignored that Wilbur retreat again and flinched at every louder noise. Ignored that he looked like he was going to cry as Phil helped him pack his backpack and choose his clothes that evening.

He blamed everything on the usual stage fright. He was there once too, he remembered how stressful any changes could be. Wilbur had been through it for the sixth time in the last five months - no wonder it was starting to overwhelm him. Phil has personally spoken to most of his new teachers just to make sure that none of them would come up with a brilliant idea to drag the kid to the front of the class and have him "tell something about himself", or ask any questions that would be normal for any other child, but in this particular case could be just... wrong.

He did everything he could, or so he thought. He assured Wilbur many times that everything would go well, and even if not, the world would not end. He tried to ask if the boy was afraid of something specific, but each time he bounced off the wall of silence, so in the end he gave up and decided to wait for further developments.

After all, he got what he wanted. Only faster than he expected - he was sure they would actually reach the school. One glance at Wilbur as he descended the stairs was enough for him to know that even this could be a problem.

"Are you okay?" He set the last plate on the table and walked over to the boy.

He reached out to touch his forehead, but Wilbur jumped back as if burned, stumbled over the last step, and landed his back on the steps. Phil cursed under his breath and immediately regretted it. Wilbur stared at him fearfully, flushed, eyes wide, clear shadows under them. His face was pale, his hands clenched into fists, and his chest rose and fell in fast, shallow breaths.

Phil took a step back to give him more space.

"All good? Did you hurt yourself?" Wilbur shook his head, quickly and briefly. "I just wanted to see if you have a fever."

Wilbur didn't answer right away. In fact, he looked as if it was costing him more energy than he should to produce any sound. Even then his voice was weak and tremulous.

"It's fine."

Phil grimaced. Just as it started thing that this damn sentence finally died - of course it had to come back. And of course Wilbur immediately interpreted his expression in the only known way and cringed even more. Of course.

Why did he even assume it was going to be a good day?

He took one more step back before he knelt down to the make better look at the boy.

"Are you sure? You look pale."

Wilbur look away.

"I'm nervous..." he muttered, which, in fact, sounded quite convincing. First, because he actually looked like a ball of nerves, second: it made a lot of sense in his situation. Phil was still not entirely convinced, but on the other hand, Wilbur had a tendency to overreact from the start. He had reasons to do so, of course, but it was still nothing new and surprising.

"You wanna stay home?" Phil wasn't entirely sure if that's what a model parent should say, but screw that. Apparently, he was the type of parent who put health above education. Too bad, in the end a kid's gonna be under-educated, but at least he won't have a heart attack before he's 30. "I can call the school and we will reschedule it to another day."

Wilbur shook his head, even faster than before.

"It's fine," he repeated, and at last, as if in evidence, stood upright. Phil frowned. You could bet it was definitely more trouble than it should have been. As if he had to send each limb a separate invitation to cooperate.

He was very reluctant to accuse the child of lying, but he couldn't help but think... well, that he was lying. Why - was a mystery to him, but he kept his eyes on the boy when they finally sat down at the table together. Especially since Wilbur made absolutely no move that would indicate he was actually going to eat anything.

"Eat," he encouraged him, mentally resetting the 'Days Without Trauma Recurrence' counter, but to his surprise the boy just shook his head.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered into his plate.

Phil opened his mouth as he prepared for a long monologue about improving daytime functioning, but changed his mind as he saw the boy's watery eyes. He could practically feel the tension in the air, a mixture of stress and fear, and something like expectation. Like the silence just before the storm.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong, and whether it was school or anything else he was going to find out.

He took a deep breath, but before he could do anything, three things happened one after the other faster than he could have predicted.

The boy reached out for his glass, but his hands were shaking to the point that he knocked it over, spilling the juice.

Instinctively, Phil reached out to save the tablecloth from being completely flooded, and immediately realized that he had made a big mistake.

Wilbur practically jumped in his chair, raising his arms to shield his head, and made a low, high-pitched noise, something between a screech and a muffled scream. It took Phil a moment to realize that it was in fact a string of "sorry" repeated on the exhale. He immediately felt that he himself was on the verge of collapsing.

"Wilbur, hey, you need to calm down." He tried his best to calm the child and himself at once. "Nothing's happening, okay? Everything is fine, nothing is happening, *you have to breathe*, please...!"

Wilbur either didn't hear him or he completely ignored him. When he lowered his hands, his eyes were wild and unfocused, his lips tight and face almost greenish. He jumped up from his chair and, pressing his hand to his mouth, ran up the stairs. Phil immediately followed him, but when he reached the mark, all he could do was see and hear the bathroom door slam.

## Chapter End Notes

I've tried replying to comments, but I'm sooo bad at it and I never know what to write, like, writing "Thank you" five times in a row seems rude? And it makes me stress?? ...I think about it way too much.

I just want everyone to know that I am very grateful for every comment, I read each one a million times and they give me a huge amount of serotonin.



## Chapter 7

*Okay, slowly, take it easy, don't screw it up Phil, don't fuck it up or you'll never forgive yourself...*

"Wilbur?", He knocked on the door, trying to sound calm, not as if he was three seconds from panic. "Wilbur, are you okay?"

In response, he heard a familiar and definitely unpleasant sound. Wilbur was vomiting.

Okay, pros and cons. Pros: he's still alive. Cons: *everything else!*

"Wilbur, I'm going in", He pressed the handle and... nothing. He pressed again, pushing against the door a little harder. Still nothing. Locked. Fuck. "You closed the door?!" He really didn't want to sound so aggressive, but fuck, fuck, fuck...! "Wilbur!"

He knew it was stupid, but he tugged the door handle again. Surprisingly, the door didn't automatically unlock in the last five seconds. Okay, okay... You have to use common sense and think rationally, gather facts, analyze the situation...

He heard muffled sobbing from the bathroom.

Fuck common sense.

He had never expected himself to be so graceful that the bathroom door swung inward. Or that he hadn't replaced them with new ones when he had the opportunity. The current ones were old enough, and after three strong stabs with the shoulder, the lock gave way with a thud. Phil held on to the doorframe to keep his balance and immediately looked around the room. In the very corner, more under the sink than next to it, Wilbur, if possible, curled even tighter. His whole body was trembling in spasmodic crying, he was gasping for shallow breath, and when his gaze met Phil's, he immediately raised his hands, hiding face behind forearms.

"Wilbur..." Phil immediately felt his determination leave him. Now that he had finally had the baby in front of him, when he should actually do something... he had no idea what. Only after the boy took a deeper, wheezing breath and immediately began to cough, Phil awoke from shock. "Shit. Stay right here, I have to bring..."

"No!" Wilbur practically lunged forward, grabbing his hand tightly. "Please don't! I-I'll be calm now, really, and I'll be quiet, I promise, really!" Phil froze in a half-step, feeling as if someone had hit him right in the head with something heavy. First, on the one side, because the scream sounded like the boy was fighting for his own life. And then on the other, when he realized that he probably really believe he's fighting for it. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *sorrysorrysorry*, please, don't...!"

"Wilbur!" Phil was pretty sure that scream wasn't the best solution, not even good or average, or even harmless one, but with every second of listening to the despairing plea, he felt



something inside him die.

Somewhere in the world there was a man who heard this child, looked at it in this state, and not only didn't try to comfort him, but also...

No. It wasn't a good time to think about it. This wasn't a good time to wonder what Wilbur thought he was going to do to him. This's the moment to show him he's wrong. Phil had no idea how he planned to do it, but God knows he'll die sooner than quit.

"Hey, hey, shhh, it's okay." Slowly, as slowly as his muscles would allow, he crouched down in front of the child, keeping his hands in view all the time. Wilbur immediately stepped back, pressing his back tightly against the wall, huddling so hard that only a few frightened eyes could be seen between his dark fringe and knees. "I'm not going to hurt you, okay? I would never hurt you." Even though he knew the boy wouldn't believe him, not right now, he still deluded that if he only repeated it often enough... "I wanted to get your inhaler. Do you think you can do without it?" Wilbur nodded. Which would have been more convincing if at the same time he didn't sound like he had to fight a long, hard battle for every gulp of air. Which he lost sometimes. But Phil had a strong feeling that leaving him alone at this point would not make it any better. "Okay okay. Can I sit here? I promise not to try to touch you, but I need to know you're okay."

Wilbur sniffed loudly.

"I'm sorry" The crying slowly turned to hiccups, which was a good sign, but Phil would appreciate it much more if he were sure the boy wasn't about to suffocate. "I-I'm so... so sorry."

"Shhh, It's okay..." It cost him all his will to at least not to try to hug the boy. How else was he supposed to calm him down? "You did nothing wrong."

Not with words, apparently, because Wilbur buried his face in his hands, and the way he took his breath... well, he was definitely not on the way to nirvana.

"I did!" The scream echoed off the bathroom and Phil flinched. It was the first time he had heard Wilbur really, really angry. The fact that he was probably angry with himself didn't make things better. "You've been nice to me. And you never even yelled at me. And I like living here. And... And I destroyed everything and now you don't want me anymore!"

Phil wasted precious three seconds processing data before his brain finally worked out any reaction. And even then it was a pure shock.

"Wilbur, what are you...?"

"I tried, I really did! But it... it was too much, everything at once and... and...! It's always like that, every time! Why... why can't I just be normal?"

Phil was sure if only he was able to focus on anything else, he would hear his own heart crackling.

"Wilbur. Hey kiddo, listen to me." He leaned forward, trying to look the boy straight in the eyes, still keeping your distance. "It's not true that I don't want you. I told you, remember? I said I wasn't going to send you back."

He should have said it more often. He should have said it more firmly. He should have made sure Wilbur really understand, damn it, he screwed it up, how could he screw it up like that at the start...?!

Wilbur grimaced, wiping his eyes with sleeve.

"Everybody says that." His voice was full of bitterness and pain. "Everybody always say that and then it happens and I have to pack again and... I don't want to pack. I like my room. I like my map. I..." He inhaled sharply and began to cry again. *"I don't want to wear that sweater anymore...!"*

"Oh, Wilbur..." If Phil still had any strength to control his emotions, he just lost it. "Can I hug you?" He asked with desperate hope, but the boy only opened his eyes wide and shook his head. "Too much? Okay. It's okay."

Wilbur's gaze softened, it clearly reassured him that someone was actually taking his opinion into account. He rested his forehead on his bent knees and hugged himself for a moment before slowly, still blindly, stretched his hand out in front of him.

"Can you...?"

Phil needed no hint.

Wilbur's hand was warm, trembling, strangely small compared to his own. Phil immediately realized that he could definitely get used to it. To the desperation with which the boy squeezed his fingers and how his breath stopped for a second as the man returned it.

It took a good half an hour for Wilbur to finally calm down. His eyes were still wet and his muscles clearly tense, but his breathing was much calmer, and he even glanced at Phil every now and then, as if checking to see if the man was still with him. He still hadn't released his hand either.

"You think you can get up?" No matter how good he felt with the trust he had been placed in, Phil definitely preferred to move somewhere more comfortable. "You should take a nap. You must be exhausted."

Wilbur nodded and, propping himself on the walls with his free hand, he struggled to his feet. He silently allowed himself to be led into the room and slipped under the blanket without hesitation, but his head jerked up as Phil tried to remove his hand from his grip.

"Can you... Can you stay a while? With me?", he asked and immediately looked as if he wished he had spoken at all. "But you don't have to! I just..."

Phil smiled as he sat on the edge of the mattress.

"It's fine", he said simply.

Because in fact - it was fine.

## Chapter 8

Much less "fine" was twenty minutes later when he searched the phone for the number of the social worker responsible for Wilbur. God knew he wasn't sure what he was doing this for. To get some confirmation? To complain? To murder someone, over the phone and remotely?

"Hey, this is Phil Watson," he began as soon as someone on the other side answered the call. "I'm calling about Wilbur."

For a few seconds, all he could hear was silence. And immediately after that - a long sigh.

"What did he do?" Someone asked in a very bored voice, and Phil immediately hated him for his too clear, unspoken 'this time'.

His fingers tightened on the phone. He could still feel the warmth of Wilbur's hand, and that was probably the only thing that kept him from snap at the first thing that came up.

"He had a panic attack. I couldn't calm him down for a good hour."

Another few seconds of silence.

"Oh." The man on the other side (Nate, Phil was sure his name was Nate) didn't even try to pretend to be surprised. "Yes, that sounds like a problem."

Phil gritted his teeth so hard he was sure he was going to break them.

"I think so too."

"Is he better now?"

"Sleeps. I think he'll be okay, I hope so."

Nate hummed understandingly.

"That's good." His voice sounded much more muffled, with keyboard tapping in the background. Phil was pretty sure the man was holding the phone with his arm so he could check on the computer. He very much hoped it was something at least minimally related to the matter. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid I must ask him to stay with you for a few more days. We really don't have anywhere to put him at the moment, and he took his last stay at group house very badly. I think we'll find something by the end of the week, but probably not sooner."

Phil slowly lifted the phone away from his ear, studied it for a few seconds to make sure that yes, the words were coming from there and, yes, directed at him.

"Excuse me?"

Nate sighed even louder, even heavier and even more weary than before.

"I know it's a difficult situation, but we really don't have the option right now..."

Phil felt himself getting hot. Out of frustration, bitterness, but most of all - absolute anger.

"I'm not going to send him back to you!" He almost yelled, and immediately looked fearfully toward the stairs. He really didn't want to wake Wilbur with a scream. He tried to lower his voice, but he couldn't do much with the obvious annoyance. And he didn't really try to. "I'm not sending him back. Why would I do this? It's just a child! He didn't murder anyone, he just..." He took a deep, calming breath. It didn't help, but at least he could tell he had tried. "I just want to know if this has happened before?" The silence in the receiver was more than enough for an answer. "Ah. So it did."

"Mr. Watson..."

"Okay, okay. Now I understand why his file doesn't say why he was kept being sent back. I would also not admit that I am throwing the boy out because he's scared and he's fucking crying!"

Nate was smart enough to ignore the last outburst and not comment.

"We've had reports that he has..." For a moment he looked for an appropriately wise-sounding formula "difficulty expressing emotions."

Phil wanted to laugh. And scream. And cry, in fact, too...

"Difficulty with... He locked himself in the bathroom! I had to break down the door!"

"I am very sorry for this."

"I thought he was going to suffocate! Christ...!" He hid his face in his hands. If Wilbur had to spend his whole life in this damn system, no wonder he was what he was. "Has anyone ever taken him to see a specialist?"

"He's under the constant care of a pulmonologist and..."

"I'm not asking about his asthma!" Okay, now he mostly wanted to cry. "Is there anyone competent nearby? Anyone?"

Nate sighed a third time.

"Mr. Watson, I really think you should calm down a little first. I assume it was a very difficult day..."

"Oh *really*?!"

"...And this conversation is really going nowhere. I propose to postpone it to another day and then we will see what we can-"

If Phil had been a little closer to his sane, he might even have appreciated the offer. But he was as far away as possible from it, so he didn't wait to find out when or what they can do.

Without a word, he disconnected and tossed the phone on the couch, then sat down heavily.

Okay. Okay. Peace, only peace could save him. And maybe a little bit of productivity, because God knows if he'll just sit and thought about this whole damn day...

He cleared the plates off the table, realizing suddenly that not only had Wilbur not eaten anything today, but he had most likely emptied his stomach of absolutely everything left in him since supper. When he wakes up, he'll be hungry as hell. And he probably won't mention it. Most likely he won't mention anything. Most likely he'll be ashamed and scared and won't voluntarily bring up the topic.

They could play it this way. To keep silence about everything and pretend that the matter is settled, that all the most important things have been said, and that is enough. Phil was damn good at it. Circling the subject and dealing only with the issues he had previously hit straight in the face and the existence of which he could no longer ignore.

He tossed the plate into the water a little more aggressively than he had planned, and rested his hands on the sink, staring unseeingly into space. Was he a bad parent? He was definitely a coward, and he must have made at least a dozen mistakes in just a week, but did that mean he was already crossed out as a good guardian? He really tried, he really cared and thought carefully about each decision, so how come it still all went wrong? Looking objectively, he knew that most things were beyond his control. Wilbur's past was not his fault. He had the right not to know, he had the right not to understand, he had the right to be surprised and confused and not know what to do. The thing was, Phil didn't know how to look at Wilbur objectively. Everything seemed simple and clear before the boy appeared in his house, when he was just a nameless child. The boy sleeping upstairs was no longer nameless. The boy who cried in the bathroom was no longer an example in the textbook. The boy who took his hand, who didn't want to be left alone, whose smile made Phil feel happy too...

This boy deserved the best. He deserved someone who knows, who understands, who has a little bit of a clue what he is doing.

This boy was...

A pair of bare feet tapped softly against the steps, and Phil almost automatically reached for a cloth, wiped his hands, and leaned out to glance at the sitting room. It might have been less than an hour since he had left Wilbur alone, and he had, in truth, quietly hoped the boy would sleep the rest of the day. He definitely looked like it needed it. And yet he was standing on the last step now, hair messy, rubbing his eyes with the sleeve... oooh, the old sweater is back! What a goddamn surprise!

Phil had no idea what to do. He had no idea what to say. So, of course, he dropped the first thing that came to mind.

"Are you hungry?"

He wasn't. Of course he wasn't. He was the most surprising and yet predictable child Phil had ever met.

"I'll make you a sandwich," he decided, because he really might have been a lousy parent, but he wasn't stupid and blind. Not that much, anyway. "Do you want something to drink? I think tea would be good for your stomach. Do you like mint?"

"I packed my things."

Phil closed his eyes with a deep sigh. Tea will have to wait.

"Sit down," he asked, pointing to the couch and sitting himself in the corner so the boy could decide what distance he wanted to keep between them. He wasn't surprised when the child practically pressed himself into the opposite support. It hurt a little, but didn't surprise.

"Wilbur... We need to talk about what happened."

Wilbur pulled the sleeves of his sweater so tight that it almost fell off his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

If he looked up, perhaps he would see a shadow flit across the man's face and understand that this is one thing he definitely shouldn't say. But his eyes were fixed on his own lap, and he clearly had no idea he could say anything else at all.

Phil took a deep breath and held it for several seconds. He had to find the right words, to play it right, and for once not to screw up.

"I'm not angry with you", he noted at the beginning. "You've done absolutely nothing wrong."

Wilbur curled his arms tighter, and his fingers, still clenched on the yellow cloth, began to tremble.

"I closed the door. And you couldn't come in."

"You closed the door because you were scared" Phil tried his best to make his voice sound steady and gentle. Which would be much easier if he didn't want to sit down and cry himself.

"And I broke down the door because I was afraid for you. Screw the door, I'd break it five more times if I had to. I just wanted you... not to get hurt. And I wanted to help you somehow. I know it didn't go perfectly, to be honest I had no idea what to do but..."

"It's fine" Wilbur said, glancing at him for the first time. Just for a second before he looked away again, but still. "You weren't yelling at me. It helped."

"Why would I yelled at you?" Phil couldn't help feeling genuinely offended. "You were terrified!"

"I made a scene."

"Wilbur, you didn't 'made a scene'. You had a panic attack."

The boy frowned and didn't answer immediately, clearly busy analyzing the new term and trying to determine whether the change was for the better or for the worse.

"Oh," he finally muttered, his shoulders visibly relaxing.

Phil would like to stop there. He would prefer to leave it as it is and not pursue the topic, for fear that if he kept digging in it, he would actually dig into something. And sooner it will be a find worthy of attention of sappers, not archaeologists. But whatever he said and whatever philosophy he followed, nothing explained making the same mistake over and over again.

"Does that happen often?" He asked, deeply hoping for a negative answer.

"More often recently."

Well. So much for hope.

"Is it always... that bad?"

Wilbur shrugged.

"This one wasn't the worst," he muttered, and Phil was pretty sure he would stop there, but to his surprise, the boy hesitated, bit his lip, and stared at his fingers for a moment, alternately tightening and loosening his grip on the sleeves of his sweater. "Once..." He tried again, much, much more quietly. "With my other family, I... really thought I was dying." His voice trembled, and Phil for a moment forgot that he had to breathe too. "I kinda... I kinda wanted to die. It was really terrible an... They had to take me to the hospital and... And they didn't want me anymore. And then, whenever it happened, they..." He wrapped his arms around him and sniffed loudly. "Nobody wanted me after that..."

Phil never believed that there was such a thing as Karma. If people actually got only what they deserved from life, the world would be a little less shit, a little safer, and a lot less overcrowded. But as he looked at the child sitting next to him, he really wanted to believe that whoever had ever hurt him would pay for it someday.

"Wilbur. You're not going anywhere, okay? I'm not going to give you to anyone. Neither today nor tomorrow nor... nor ever. There is no way anyone would force me to send you off."

Wilbur didn't even look at him. He didn't have to. Phil could read absolutely all emotions on his face. And neither of them indicated that he believed what he was hearing at least a little.

"Why?"

Phil was afraid of that question. Not because he didn't know the answer. It was more obvious than anything that has ever happened in his life. But as he tried to say it out loud, he realized that he didn't know any word that could contain all the emotions that filled him. He could tell himself that he just wanted to help. That it is about compassion and ordinary human empathy. Wilbur deserved to finally have a home, to finally feel safe, to have someone who really cares for him. But he knew very well that there was more to it. That as much as he wanted the boy to be happy, he also wanted to be the one who would make him happy. He was not naive. He'd known Wilbur for only a week, and he knew deeper feelings don't come overnight, that it takes time to bond with someone, that love at first sight doesn't exist, no matter what kind. That you can't just look at someone and know... Just know.



And yet Phil just knew. From the moment he saw Wilbur for the first time, something in his heart, mind, soul, all of him had snapped into right place and he knew, he just knew.

Wilbur was his child. His son.

It was too early to say it aloud. Much, much too soon. But there was still something he could and should have said.

"Because... I always want to be there so I can check that you're okay. And check if you need someone to break down the door. And I want to know if you're not hungry. If you're fed up with clean sweaters. And if you don't eat sand. And I want to see the moment when you finally make it to the finish line." Wilbur's mouth twitched in a faint smile. "And I need someone who knows which country has the capital in Helisinki."

He reached out and carefully closed the boy's hand in his. He could hear his breathing, much, much calmer, but he could still see the uncertainty and hesitation in his eyes.

"You can just check on the map."

Phil squeezed his fingers a little tighter.

"I can," he admitted. "But I don't want to."

For a long moment they sat in silence, pleasant and reassuring, full of mute assurances and promises. Phil could feel Wilbur's gradual loosening, how the unfortunate sleeves were no longer tiring, the residual tension vanished from his face. He looked much calmer, much younger, and so vulnerable like he had never allowed himself to be before.

And then, quite suddenly and without saying a word, he pulled his legs up to the couch, go on all fours to take his seat next to Phil, and, drawing his knees up to his chin, rested his head against his shoulder. The man froze for a moment, taken by surprise, instinctively tried to hug the kid and pull him closer, but quickly pulled his hand back as Wilbur flinched at the sudden movement.

Not yet. It had to be enough for now. And it was enough.

Well, maybe almost enough.

"Can I throw that sweater away now?"

Wilbur grinned, broadly and sincerely, and nodded.

"You can.

## Chapter 9

"Phil? How can you make someone like you?"

The man froze with a knife millimeters above the parsley.

"Well..." he muttered, trying to buy himself some time. Wilbur's intense gaze didn't help him concentrate one bit. "You have to be yourself? I think so."

The boy frowned.

"And it really works?"

"I like you, so I think it works." He shrugged, smiling slightly at the sight of the boy's expression. Almost a month had passed since he had arrived at his house, and yet he still seemed dazed every time Phil showed him affection in any more direct way. "Why do you ask?"

Wilbur shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"There's a boy." He stretched out his forearms on the kitchen counter and rested his chin on them as he watched Phil finish cutting the vegetables. "Schlatt. We sit together in class. He's really funny."

The vegetables landed in the pot with a loud splash and Phil wiped his hands on a cloth, finally getting his full attention to the boy.

"And you would like to befriend him?"

Wilbur bit his lip, and for a moment only scratched his finger across the remains of the scattered flour on the table.

"Yeah..." he nodded finally, still clearly ashamed. Phil wasn't sure if he felt uncomfortable asking for advice or just looking for colleagues, but for whatever reason - it needed to be changed.

"I still think my first advice was the best," he said in a confident tone, because he had a lot of friends in his life who were definitely not his associates and he definitely had more topics in common with them than work. Definitely. "Ah, but I can also give you some cookies so you can share with him during the break."

Wilbur took a long breath, a mischievous smile spread across his face.

"We'll buy his love," he whispered dramatically.

Phil tried hard not to laugh, because God knew that the more the boy picked up on his own twisted sense of humor, the more trouble he could get into one day. Of course, he failed completely, but could anyone really blame him?

"I wouldn't put it that way... but yes. This;s what we'll do. Do you have homework to do?" The boy nodded, his smile visibly fading. "Okay, try to get it done before dinner, then we'll watch a movie afterward. What do you think?"

Wilbur nodded a second time, this time much more enthusiastically, and immediately ran out of the kitchen. He slid more than half of the living room, stumbled, and at the last moment grabbed the stair railing, saving his nose from hitting the floor. Phil watched him go until his colorful socks shuffled on the top of the steps and the door to the room slammed. Only then did he turn and, shaking his head, set the pot down on the stove. If someone had told him three weeks ago that there was a cunning, saucy gremlin beneath a thick layer of fear and panic, he would never have believed it. Not that he was complaining. Each day when Wilbur felt the world deserved to see a bit of his true character was a day decisively worth living. He just couldn't get over how much change had happened in the boy in such a short time.

Which, of course, didn't mean a miraculous recovery and automatic removal of acquired traumas. Wilbur wasn't a robot that could wipe a disk, erase data, and put it into a new, better mode. He was a human being and, as with every human being, there were times when he felt worse. Less than two days ago he spilled the juice on the couch, and it took a good twenty minutes before Phil convinced him that nothing big had happened. There were times when he was quiet and withdrawn all day. It happened that he stared at an empty plate and only after a long time remembered that he might start eating. There were times when everything was fine until some small, inconspicuous thing touched a sensitive string in him. Sometimes Phil would know immediately why his hands were starting to tremble, his breathing quickened, his eyes getting wettery. Sometimes he didn't understand and searched for the cause blindly. Sometimes he guessed right. Sometimes not. But even when all he could offer was to be next to him, Wilbur accepted his presence with unspeakable gratitude and clung to him more and more every day.

There were still limits that they had not yet tried to cross. When Wilbur sat down next to him on the couch that evening and rested his head against his shoulder, Phil made no attempt to hug him. He also made sure that he never touched him without asking for permission beforehand, and tried to look for any disturbing signs even in seemingly normal situations. Wilbur was slowly getting used to the fact that he would not be punished for showing his emotions, even if he had chosen the most dramatic way of reacting. But he still couldn't break enough to come and ask for help himself.

That's why Phil was so damned surprised when he saw an incoming call on the display. It was almost eleven, which meant the boy was at school, potentially in class. Phil was not a big fan of giving kids cell phones, not in the age of widespread internet access and rising addiction rates. But he was even less of a fan of not being contacted in an emergency, so Wilbur eventually inherited one of his old phone calls. Which he apparently had just decided to make use of.

Phil tried to stay calm, not to jump to conclusions, and not to think about any of the thousand horrible things that could have happened to the boy, that was just flying through his mind one by one. Wilbur was at school, he was safe, nothing bad would happen to him. Everything was fine, everything was fine, everything was fine...

"Phil...!" He heard in the receiver as soon as he answered the call. Loud, despairing cry. Then a muffled sob.

Fuck.

Before he took care of Wilbur, Phil had never spent a particularly long time with any child. But he himself had been one of them once long enough to remember that there are different kinds of screaming. There's a scream "I can wait another five minutes", a scream "I don't want to do it myself, so come and do it for me" and a scream "Five minutes have passed, why are you not here?!". And there is also a cry of "Please, I'm scared, I need you now, now, nownownownow...!".

Wilbur definitely used the latter.

"What's happening?" He was pretty sure if there was the record for the fastest pressure spike, he just beat it. He sprang up from his armchair and before he could even think about it, he was already in the hall, just as if putting on his shoes. "Wilbur, where are you? What happened?"

He heard a loud sniff, a few quick, wheezing breaths, and only miraculously stopped himself from screaming. Screaming is the wrong way, it's a very, very bad way, but damn he needed an answer, and he needed it now!

"Can you..." Wilbur finally managed to put a few words together. "Phil, please, can you get me out of here?"

"Where are you?" He repeated, checking his pockets for car keys. Shit, why didn't he ever remember putting them back in place!?

"I'm in the bathroom. N-near... Near the gym. Phil, please, I can't... I can't calm down, Phil, I can't... I can't stop remembering. Phil, please, please come over..." He blurted out his words faster and faster, his voice shrill, and when he finally paused to catch his breath, it sounded like he had emerged from the water only to be swept away by another wave.

"You are alone?" Phil held the phone with his shoulder as he fired the engine without spending a second to fasten seatbelts. Fuck the law! Whoever wrote it up clearly had no children! "Can you get someone? Some teacher?" In response, he got a gibberish from which he didn't understand a word, but which he chose to interpret as 'I don't think so' "Okay, okay, shhh, take it easy. That's fine. That's fine. We can do it. Focus on my voice, okay? I promise nothing bad will happen to you. Can you take a look around, Wilbur?"

Whatever happened, he had to keep the child's attention at all costs. If it was even half as bad as it sounded... He didn't even want to think about what would happen if he added an asthma attack to his panic attack.

A few tense and sobbing seconds later, he finally heard a soft:

"Yea..."

Okay. Okay, now slowly, take it easy.

"Great. List five things you see."

"Um... My shoes. And... And there're signs on the door and... and... Phil, please, can you come? Can you come now? Please, Phil, now, I can't...!"

Fuk. Fuck, fuck, fuck! It doesn't work. Why is it not working? It was supposed to work!

"I'm on my way," he said, looking desperately for anything that might distract the boy from the chaos that was just going on in his head. Focus, Phil, focus, something Wilbur likes, something that calms him down... "I'm leaving on our street. I passed our neighbors house. Do you remember them? They speak Russian."

"Yea..."

"You showed me Russia on the map, remember? And their flag. It was..." He turned, practical driving onto the sidewalk. "I can't remember the colors..."

For a few seconds, he only heard silence, and he could have sworn he would lose touch with reality at any moment. And immediately after:

"White." Wilbur's voice was still weak and shaky, but at least it was. Thank you God who does not exist. "And blue and red."

"Oh yeah! Exactly! There's another country with a flag like that, right? Gosh, what was that...?"

"France?"

"France!" Phil snapped his fingers. Soon after, one of those fingers showed the driver who had the nerve to horn as Phil drove through the intersection at a red light. "Remind me where it is?"

He wasn't sure if the World Health Organization would endorse his method of fighting the panic attack as appropriate. What he was sure of was that Wilbur was actually answering him, quietly, on the exhale, between one sob and another, but he did answer, and with each subsequent question he seemed a little... well, certainly not calmer, but closer to reality. As if he had found something to hold on to and get some stability.

When less than fifteen minutes later Phil finally burst into the bathroom (he would have been faster if he knew where the goddamn gym was!), he didn't even have to call the boy to know he had hit the right place. From one of the booths there was an all-too-familiar shallow breathing, interrupted by coughing and slurping noses.

"Wilbur?" He knocked on the door, putting the phone in his pocket with his free hand. "Hey, it's me. Can you come out please?"

For a moment he only heard the silence, and he was already calculating how much the school would charge him for breaking a thin piece of plywood pretending to be a door. But then,

unexpectedly, the lock clicked, and flushed, tear-stained face appeared to him in all its glory.

In an instant, he felt all fear abandon him, replaced by compassion, concern, and an overwhelming urge to embrace the child and never let go again.

"Oh, Wilbur..."

He didn't have time to say any more. He didn't have to.

Wilbur made the most pained face he had ever seen, a face screaming "I called you and you were gone!" and without a word he threw himself into his arms. Phil, taken completely by surprise at first, immediately knelt down, letting him hug his neck tightly.

"Hey, hey. It's okay. It's all right now, kiddo. I'm here."

"I-I'm s-sorry..." Hiccups joined the crying. "I-I... I didn't want to make a c-call, really! B-but it was... It was so loud and so much and... and I-I remembered something and..."

"Shh... Come on now. You did very well. I'm proud of you."

He could clearly feel the boy flinch and freeze for a second.

"You are...?"

"Yes. You asked for help when you needed it. You were very brave and I am very proud of you. "He could have sworn he had told him this before, that he had said it to him many, many times... but maybe not really. Maybe he just thought about it every time, because it seemed too obvious to him to say it aloud. He definitely had a lot to learn. "Can you let me go for a while? Just for a second, I promise."

Wilbur slowly and reluctantly relaxed his grip. But he still held his arms raised, clearly waiting only for the first signal that he might cuddle again. If Phil hadn't love this kid from ages, now he would have had no other choice.

As soon as he could, he took off his jacket and threw it over the boy's shoulders, pulling the hood deep up to his eyes. The school was still quiet, but Phil definitely didn't want to risk the bell catching them off halfway. The last thing Wilbur needed was the stress of hundreds of kids staring at him.

"I'll carry you, okay?" He waited for a quick nod and grabbed the boy just above his knees, straightening up, letting kid's legs wrap around his waist and arms around his neck. He glanced at the cracked mirror above the sink and, finding with satisfaction that Wilbur was completely unrecognizable with his face pressed against his shirt, stepped out into the hallway with relief.

Wilbur fell asleep in the car on the way home. Phil tried to move him inside as carefully as possible, but the boy woke up anyway, stared at him with large, still reddened eyes, and immediately embraced him as tightly as he was afraid he would disappear.

"Can you stay?"

Phil could. He could and would, so he just lay down on the bed next to the boy and spent the next two hours listening to his calm, steady breathing and running his fingers through his dark hair. After all, he also needed a little peace afterwards.

They woke up from their nap a few minutes after two p.m., both deathly hungry and very reluctant to get up and do anything about it.

"I'll order us a pizza," Phil muttered, turning to reach for his phone. He glanced at Wilbur's phone, lying next to his on the nightstand. He frowned and handed it to the boy with a raised eyebrow.

"You have a message, I think."

Wilbur seemed equally surprised, but after a few seconds of clicking the screen, a wide smile appeared on his face.

"It's Schlatt," he explained, clearly excited. "He asks if I'm alive and why I was gone."

"O. So he liked our cookies?"

The boy shrugged.

"No," he said, busy replying to the message. "He doesn't like the ones with nuts." He hesitated for a moment. "But... he likes me, I suppose? I think so?"

Phil couldn't help but tangle his hair (which was met with a dissatisfied "Oi!")

"Ha! I told you. Damn, I'm good at this. Maybe I'll change my job and start giving advice for money?"

Wilbur inhaled dramatically, making the most theatrical face possible.

"Please don't. I just got used to not being hungry."

Phil opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again.

Oh. So it's true after all that trauma shapes a sense of humor.

God knows this boy will be the end of him one day.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

I'm sorry it took so long, I literally forgot, lmao.

Phil had no idea how or when another month had passed since Wilbur showed up at his house. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that between work and caring for the child, he could barely find time to sleep for a few hours and, possibly, watch a movie in which neither of the characters suddenly started singing. He made a very grave mistake in revealing the world of musicals to Wilbur and paying a high price for it. Still, it was a good month. Very good. Probably one of the best Phil remembered. And while he was tired, frustrated, and confused, he still wouldn't change a single decision that led to it.

Even if he sometimes recalled with a certain nostalgia the times when he came home with his groceries and didn't find a tent of blankets and pillows instead of the table. Not that he could be angry about it. Not when Wilbur, balancing on the back of the couch with Schlatt, smiled so brightly and carelessly.

"The floor is lava!", he announced far too enthusiastically for someone on the verge of life and death. Soon after, he gave a big leap towards the chair, but took the wrong distance and Phil had to risk being burned alive to see if he had twisted his ankle.

They ate on the couch for the next week because Wilbur flatly refused to move his new "base" somewhere less disruptive to normal operation. Fortunately, with the first snowfall, the fun moved to the court. It made Phil not a bit calmer, especially since he had fallen twice in the icy driveway, but at least the house had regained its original decor. Not counting constantly wet hats, gloves and scarves hung over the radiators.

"You are mad at me?", Wilbur croaked between bouts of coughing. Phil immediately tore his eyes from the thermometer and looked at the boy closely. Theoretically, two doctors assured him that it was a common cold and the boy was in absolutely no danger, but the internet still said something completely different. Something about cancer, dying, and selecting tombstones, to be more specific.

"I'm not angry", he said almost involuntarily, sighing inwardly. He didn't like this question. Not because he was irritated by repeating the same thing over and over again every day (well, maybe a little, sometimes, but he'd never admit it even to himself). There was something bloody sad knowing the boy's first instinct was still to assume that he had done something wrong. That no matter how much time they spent together, Wilbur would sometimes still look at him with fear, was still afraid of the sudden movements and would freeze when Phil raised his voice, even if he was only doing it to shout over the noise in the supermarket.



"I'm not angry", he repeated a few days later when the boy woke him in the middle of the night. "Why would I be angry with you?"

Wilbur looked down at the floor, wrapping his arms around himself tighter.

"I don't know. You seemed angry. Before, when you came to say 'good night'."

Phil was absolutely sure he had acted exactly the same as he had done every night, but he had long since learned that the more he tried to explain himself, the more stressed and embarrassed Wilbur became. Without a word, he shifted and lifted the covers, making the boy room next to him.

He made a note in his head (once again) to finally contact some child therapist. He waited far longer than he should have before it finally dawned on him that love and acceptance, while undoubtedly useful, might not be enough at times. When someone breaks his leg, you don't stand over him and say that you love him unconditionally. At least not until a doctor sees him and the risk of bleeding is zero.

Predictably, Wilbur was not thrilled with the idea.

"You think I'm crazy!", he shouted as he ran up the stairs, then slammed the door to the room with such force that Phil wasn't sure how the jamb survived this burst of emotion.

He was also not sure what or if he should answer at all, so, choosing the only logical option, he didn't answer at all, patiently waiting for the boy to calmly think through the matter. Indeed, it was less than a week before Wilbur raised the subject of his own free will. Though it didn't sound like he'd come to some specific conclusions after deeper reflection - more like it bothered him at night and he really wanted to get over it.

"You really think I need this?", he asked, sluggishly nibbling on a sandwich he didn't want to eat. His fingers were buttered, though, and Phil could imagine him rubbing them on his new pants.

He hesitated for a moment, looking for a suitable way to say 'yes' without saying it.

"I think it might help you. I will not force you to do anything. And I won't be angry if you say no", he added quickly. "But it doesn't hurt to try? You'll be able to quit whenever you want, I promise."

Wilbur practically lay down on the table, pushing away the plate of battered sandwich remnants.

"I just wish I could be normal", he muttered, hiding his face in his forearm. He didn't seem angry like the last time, but rather very bitter and disappointed. Of the two baddies, Phil preferred him scream and slam the door.

"You *are* normal," he said as he crouched down next to him. Carefully he grabbed the boy by the shoulders, urging him to sit up straight. "It's perfectly normal that you need help. Everyone needs it sometimes."

Wilbur shifted uneasily. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it without saying a word, and for a moment just stared at his feet, rubbing one against the other.

"Can't *you* help me?", he finally muttered.

Phil took a long breath, held his lungs for a moment, and let it out slowly, buying himself a few extra seconds. He had never felt so overwhelmed by the amount of trust he had been placed in his life. And he knew that this is definitely not the first time that it will not live up to expectations.

"I'd love to know how", he sighed, probably more disappointed with himself than the boy would ever be. But he didn't have much time to feel sorry, and certainly not in front of the child. He frowned. "Wilbur, do you trust me?" The boy blinked at the sudden seriousness, but nodded. "In that case, believe me that you have nothing to fear. Nor should you be ashamed. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with admitting that sometimes you can't cope with something and need the help of a specialist. If you break the tap - you call the plumber. If something hurts you - you go to the doctor."

The corner of Wilbur's mouth twitched slightly.

"If you break your computer - you turn it on and off."

Phil had made a promise once that he would never in his life say any of the damn sentences that all the parents of the world repeated over and over again, as if they were learning parenting from the same book. And yet his first, automatic and completely ill-considered response was:

"If only you were so smart at school..." \*

The boy laughed, completely unaware of Phil's downfall and failure in life.

"I'm very smart at school!"

Phil stopped analyzing his life choices and the eternal conflict of the individual with the laws of the universe for a moment and smiled broadly.

"You're smart", he admitted, ruffling his dark hair. Wilbur blushed, clearly surprised that his joke got a completely honest and serious response. "Okay, let's do this. I won't bother you with this for now if you promise to seriously think about it, okay?"

A soft little voice in the back of his head told him that he should definitely not leave such an important decision in the hands of a nine-year-old, but for the moment he decided to ignore it. Or best to gag and lock it deep in the basement. What was he supposed to do? Force Wilbur to go to therapy? Keep pressing him until he finally gives in, probably out of fear? Bomb him with remorse?

Sometimes he wondered how mankind has been able to keep its offspring alive. Maybe some of them were more predisposed to it than others. Perhaps he himself belonged to the latter group.

Wilbur, unsurprisingly, didn't bring up the topic for the next few weeks, but Phil didn't have the heart to remind him of it just before Christmas. Serious conversations didn't quite fit with gluing paper chains, decorating the Christmas tree and baking gingerbread.

Waking up at six in the morning on Christmas Day, on the other hand, did not quite fit the idea of rest, but apparently it didn't apply to those under the age of ten.

"Phil!" Wilbur pounded on the bedroom door. "Phil, there are gifts under the tree!"

The man pulled the covers over his head, quietly hoping that if he pretended that something didn't exist, it would really be gone.

"Yeah", he hummed as the door was put to the test a second time. "That's good. They'll be there in two hours too, you know?"

He rolled over as he heard the boy run down the stairs. He was under no illusion that he would actually get enough sleep, but he counted on at least a short nap. In less than two minutes, my bare feet tapped the steps a second time, and this time the door swung open, letting a blinding light from the corridor enter the room.

"Phil." Wilbur jumped onto the bed and tugged at his arm. "Phil, some are *for me*."

He sounded and looked so excited and surprised at the same time that the man instantly forgot his fatigue. Ultimately, coffee was created for such occasions.

"Of course they are. I would be very surprised if they were for someone else."

They spent the morning in pajamas, Phil sipping coffee, Wilbur sipping hot chocolate. One of the classic Christmas movies that everyone knew by heart was on TV, but none of them paid much attention to the plot. Just like to the colorful paper scattered on the floor. Wilbur opened each gift with equal excitement, and each time seemed amazed that the box did not turn out to be empty.

"And can I really keep it all?"

Phil didn't ask why it had occurred to him at all that he would have to hand over his own gifts. Instead, he put three large exclamation marks next to the mental note 'THERAPY'.

"I'll call him 'Friend'." Wilbur's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. The boy had a large blue sheep in his lap, and he kissed it over and over on its plush face when he was convinced that no one was watching.

Phil just couldn't help smiling at the sight.

"That's a nice name."

He reached out to pretend it was scratching the stuffed animal behind the ear, then reached a little higher, ruffling Wilbur's hair.

"Hey!" The boy laughed, avoiding the touch. Unfortunately, he was sitting in the very corner of the couch, with nowhere to escape the massive tickle attack. "Phiiil, nooo...!"

Phil chose not to take prisoners.

\* "If only you were so smart at school ..."

I wrote this scene and only when I started to translate it and did a reaserch did I discover that APPARENTLY only Polish parents say that? And I'm too lazy to change that, so you get this footnote, lol.

Generally, "Żebyś ty taki mądry w szkole był!" is something parents say when you dismiss all their arguments. Longer version of "Don't you talk back to me!".

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

It's just a short fluff today, but I promise that next one will be longer.

It was mid-February before Wilbur decided that therapy might indeed be a good idea. Or at least harmless.

"Puffy is cool," he said after returning from the first session. He was visibly excited and followed Phil step by step around the house, constantly making sure he had his full attention. "She wasn't screaming, not even once. And she said I'm not crazy at all. And that it's okay that sometimes I feel sad for no reason." He frowned. "Are you sad sometimes, Phil?"

"I think so. Yes, sometimes."

"Oh. You can tell me then, you know?" He reached out and squeezed Phil's hand, copying his own gesture. "I won't be angry. I promise."

The man pursed his lips, trying not to laugh and ruin the sublime atmosphere.

"Okay. Thank you, I will remember", he assured, and then grew serious. "I am very proud of you."

Wilbur blinked, staring at him with large, wide eyes.

"Why?"

"Well... You thought about what I told you, and you made the wise decision yourself. That's very mature."

"Oh." He paused for a moment. "You're weird sometimes, Phil."

"You think so?"

"Yes. Really, really weird. But you say nice things then, so it's fine. "

Phil made a note in his head to be "weird" as often as possible. Especially since Wilbur, though sometimes he had a stupid ideas like every child, behaved perfectly fine most of the time. He did well in school, none of the teachers ever complained about him, and the more he got used to and got out of his shell, the more it became obvious that he was by nature a bright and goddamn talkative kid.

"I'm just saying it doesn't really matter." Phil shrugged the same evening as he set the oven to the right temperature. "No difference."

Wilbur glared at him over the bowl from which he was just finishing eating the leftover dough. It was hard to judge what was more stained with chocolate - his face or hands.

"It makes a huge difference."

"They're exactly the same colors."

"Yes, but in *different way!*"

Phil rolled his eyes. One would think that ten-year-olds have more interesting activities than telling adults that maybe they actually mistook the flags of Poland and Monaco...

"No difference," he repeated, because when arguments are over, it's always best to be stubborn and just pretend. He scooped all the dirty spoons, bowls, and cups down the sink and stared at them for a few seconds, silently hoping they would start to wash off by themselves. They didn't. Damn surprising.

"It's very rude." Wilbur, licking the remnants of chocolate off his fingers, leaned over the table to hand him the bowl. His expression showed an absolute unwillingness to offer help with the cleaning. "How would you feel if someone from Monaco mistake your flag, Phil?"

"I would be devastated at how much I don't care about it" he said firmly, as befits someone who, five minutes ago, didn't even know there was a country like Monaco, said firmly. "You know when I will care? When you mess my walls with those dirty hands. Now, wash them!"

He backed away from the sink, shaking the water from his hands towards the boy, who immediately dodged with a screech.

"You're angry because you offended two countries and now you feel stupid!", he laughed and was immediately hit with water again. "Flagophobe!"

"There is no such thing."

"Now it is! You're the first in the world. Are you proud of yourself?"

"Like hell. But speaking of achievements. What about our... *your* project for that class?"

Wilbur stopped smiling immediately.

"Yeah... I'll have to do it again."

Phil gasped with shock. And a little scare, because God knows that he cursed over this damn model more than in his whole life. You think there is nothing easier than a model of the solar system, then sit for hours brushing styrofoam forms with a small brush, only to find out that Pluto is no longer a planet for some reason.

"*Again?! But why? It was a good project!*"

"Too good. The teacher said there's no chance that I made it myself."

"You made it yourself!" He was indignant, but immediately remembered that in the final version all the planets were shining and rotating on their axis. And Saturn was playing the Imperial March. For aesthetic reasons. "Well, almost. You helped."

Wilbur nodded eagerly.

"I was eating cookies and handing out a screwdriver."

"Exactly. You created an atmosphere conducive to work. A very responsible position. But did you confess?"

Wilbur looked at him with surprise.

"To what?" he asked with such an innocent face that if Phil still hadn't dreamed about colored wires, he probably would have believed him himself. "I didn't do anything wrong. I'm just smarter than the other kids. It's not my fault."

Phil probably shouldn't be laughing. Or at least not that loud.

"It's not even a lie!"

Wilbur grinned broadly. No matter how often Phil did it, he continued to receive compliments with equal delight. As if he had only recently unlocked this option and was still surprised at the possibilities it offers.

Phil promised himself to show him all of them.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A heat wave hit at the beginning of the summer vacation and Wilbur started to disappear from the house for day, only to appear to eat dinner on the run or to fall on the bed in the evening and immediately fall asleep from exhaustion.

"I've never had so many friends!" He got excited when Phil was packing him cookies so he could share with other boys. "Actually, I never had friends at all... You think I was doing something wrong?" He shrugged, not waiting for Phil to come up with a sensible answer. "Doesn't matter now. Can you leave me some for the way?"

"I thought you were gonna go by bike."

"I can ride and eat at the same time."

Phil, who had taught him to ride a few weeks before, tried with a heavy sigh to remember where he had left the first aid kit. He sincerely hoped it would end up with bruised knees, not broken teeth.

Sometimes he missed lazy afternoons on the couch and watching movies together or losing at cards on purpose. He lived alone for several years, but the house never seemed to him as empty and quiet as it is now. Not that he was trying to keep the boy at home, not in such good weather and not when he was practically swallowing the fries whole, because "There's no time, everyone's waiting!". Phil was an adult, he knew how to organize his time. And if Wilbur needed anything in large amount, it was definitely fresh air and peer contact.

And a goddamn inhaler.

Which Phil found abandoned and completely forgotten on the hall cupboard.

At first, almost instinctively, he pulled out his phone to call and partly make sure the boy was still alive, partly murder him for giving him a heart attack. Only the realization that Wilbur would have sensed his anger immediately held him back. The last thing they both needed was a panic attack somewhere far from home. Besides, the boy was not alone. Schlatt may not have been Phil's favorite, but Dream or Sapnap had the brain cell (one to share) to call for help with any problems. The fact that the phone was silent was therefore a good sign. Frustrating but good.

He couldn't concentrate on his work. He stared at the blinking cursor for a good ten minutes before realizing that and angrily closed the blank document. He needed something to do, anything, but no matter how firmly he told it to himself, all his thoughts immediately ran in a completely different direction. What should he do? What would a good, reasonable parent do? Probably the opposite of what he usually does. He didn't want to appear overprotective,



Wilbur should feel that he trusted him and would not control him at every turn. On the other hand, trust has been put to a serious test today and the boy should be aware of that.

He really wished there was anyone else with similar problems who he could ask for advice.

He wished there was anyone he could ask for advice, with or without problems.

It was almost four pm and Phil was brushing the dust in the living room for the fourth time just to do something with his hands, when the front door finally opened and Wilbur burst in with a gleeful "I'm home!".

Phil was absolutely sure that if any coach saw him at that moment, he would be put on the spot as the national for the hundred meters. By the time the door closed behind the boy with a soft click of a lock, the man was there, kneeling down and examining the child from top to bottom. And back, just to be sure.

Wilbur's hair was wet, pushed back carelessly from his forehead, his damp shirt was sticky to his body, and his shoes left muddy marks on the floor, although it hadn't been raining for a good two weeks and the ground around had dried to a chip. In the whole area, except the shores of the lake.

Phil didn't have to ask where they were or what they were doing. He didn't have to and did not intend to, because although he didn't mind them sitting by the water in hot weather, he categorically forbade the child to even think about swimming without any supervision. He didn't know which would be worse: if Wilbur had confirmed that he had knowingly disobey and not even tried to hide it, or if he had been clumsily and brazenly tried to lie.

Water dripped slowly from Wilbur's hair, and Phil felt his anger building up with every drop. Now that he had the boy in front of him, knowing that he was fine, all his fear instantly flew away, freeing his frustration and fatigue.

"Couch," he said over his shoulder, turning to take his place on it himself.

Wilbur, clearly getting ready to tell a long story about everything he was doing today, stopped smiling, but followed him obediently .

"Can I change first?" he asked, but immediately fell silent as Phil picked up the inhaler.

"Wilbur, what is this?"

The boy looked as if he wanted to begin a theatrical search of his pockets. Some color drained from his face.

"Oh..."

"Yhm. Exactly. What is the most important thing I always ask for?"

Wilbur bit his lip.

"To always carry an inhaler with me" he replied and, in accordance with "he who excuses himself accuses himself" - he immediately began to excuse. "But I was fine! I'm *fine*, really!"

Phil silenced him with one sharp look.

"And that's what you are supposed to wear it for, to make sure it won't change. What was the second thing I asked for today?"

This time the answer was not so quick. Not because the boy didn't know, Phil could tell from his expression that he knew exactly what was going on, and is just trying to come up with any excuses.

"To not go into the water when no adult is around.", he said finally. And then, as predicted: "But I was only at the shore! And *everyone* was swimming! It's so hot...!"

With the last remnants of his willpower, Phil suppressed the question of friends jumping off the bridge. He still had remnants of dignity. What can't be said about nerves.

"I have no doubt you were hot," he said dryly. "And what was the third thing I asked for? *Please* remind me", he encouraged in a tone that clearly indicated that the word "please" was there only for decoration.

Wilbur grimaced, not so willing to dig his own grave, but apparently he had understood by now that Phil was not going to let go, because in the end he just hung his head.

"To not run like wild because I would get hot", he muttered, suddenly very interested in his socks. Completely soaked and leaving obvious marks on the floor, which was not in his favor. "But I wasn't running...! Just a little. Others ran *more*."

Phil was on the tip of his tongue how deeply he respected what "others" did. The "others" wouldn't have to live with the thought that their child had drowned in a goddamn lake. Or suffocated during an asthma attack. Or choked on dirty water and got pneumonia. The "others" didn't have to think about all of these things. They had no nightmares about it.

"Wilbur." Still, he tried to keep his nerves under control, because he knew what he was about to say was more of the brutal truth. There was no need to make it even more difficult to accept. He wanted to be strict, not cruel. "I know you want to keep up with others, and I know you probably had fun and didn't think about it. But you are ill. You have chronic disease and your asthma is not taking time off just because you are on vacation. I'm sorry to say that, but you are not like the other kids, Wilbur. Not on that one point." The boy opened his mouth, probably to protest, but Phil silenced him with a single gesture. "I didn't finish. That was one thing. Now the second." He put a hand on the boy's shoulder, waiting patiently for him to meet his eyes. "If I see or hear or find out in any other way that you've stepped into the lake, if only ankle-high, without any supervision, you won't leave the house until fall or longer. And I don't care if you know how to swim. Do something that stupid one more time and you'll spend the rest of the summer in your room. And at least I'll be sure you're safe."

He had rarely spoken to Wilbur that way; usually, he simply had no reasons for it, and he believed much more in the effectiveness of rewards than punishments (especially in the case of a child whose entire upbringing was based solely on the latter). But for all his weakness for the boy, however, he was absolutely sure that if necessary, he would not hesitate a second to fulfill the threat. Not when it came to the vision of divers fishing the body of his child from the bottom of the lake.

"Do you understand?", he made sure, while the boy was just staring at him with wide eyes.

Wilbur nodded immediately, as if afraid that every second he delay would get him into even more trouble.

"Are you angry?" was the first he asked about. Because of course he asked about it.

And Phil, probably for the first time, confirmed.

"I'm angry."

The room fell silent, heavy and tense. The remnants of color drained from Wilbur's face, his eyes, wide in mute shock, glazed over, and his lips pressed into a narrow line.

"Oh..." he blurted out, quiet and tearful, and Phil immediately felt his heart begin to soften. Though, thank God, not enough to dim his mind and take back everything he just said.

"Wilbur." He tried to take boy's hand, but he just flinched and quickly stepped back beyond his reach. Phil had to use all his willpower to pretend it didn't hurt him at all. "Listen. I'm damn mad because I asked you for something and you didn't obey. And I'm really disappointed because I was sure that you are much more responsible and you know that if I forbid you something, it's always for some reason.

The boy hung his head, nervously rubbing one foot against the other.

"I know. I'm sorry. But don't be angry..."

He looked at the child more closely, trying to judge if he really understood fully. He wanted to make him think and temper him a bit, but not scare him to death. For the vast majority of the time, Wilbur was well-behaved to the point of exaggeration, and Phil took that into account.

"I'm just worried about you. If something happens to you..." He broke off, feeling that the honest ending of this sentence was unlikely to be suitable for a child's ears, unless he wanted to traumatize him again. "I have no idea what I'm going to do then, I guess I'll go crazy with fear." I'm trying to make sure you live to your next birthday, please don't make it difficult for me."

Wilbur glanced at him as if he were trying to judge whether the tension between them was actually losing a little.

"Only to next birthday?"

Phil couldn't help smiling.

"Maybe a little longer," he admitted, and with a heavy sigh, he opened his arms wide. "Come here."

Wilbur didn't have to be told twice.

"You're not angry anymore?", he asked, his face pressed against Phil's shoulder. His hair was still wet, as was his shirt, which meant both of them would be wet in a few seconds. Not that any of them noticed it. Not enough to break the hug because of it.

The easiest way would be to just let it go and told him everything is okay. The easiest and definitely the worst when it comes to the overall message. Sooner or later a similar situation would happen again and Wilbur would only be more confused. People got angry with each other. The parents got mad at the kids and the kids got mad at the parents, and there was nothing surprising or abnormal about it. Anger was an emotion the same as joy or sadness, and the sooner Wilbur learned to express it in a healthy way, the better. The sooner he finds out that someone might be angry with him and not want to hurt him or abandon him, or hate him for it for the rest of his life, the greater the chance that he will eventually stop being afraid.

Phil hugged him a little tighter.

"I am angry. And I probably will be for a little longer", he clarified, and feeling the boy's muscles tense again, he immediately added, "But that doesn't mean I've stopped loving you."

He felt more than heard the baby hold his breath for a moment, and it was only then that he realized that this was perhaps the first time he had described his feelings so openly. Not because he'd only just realized it now - it had just never occurred to him that he should. He was sure he was saying it all the time. Maybe not directly, maybe not with words, but with every gesture, every look, every moment he spent with the child. He was absolutely sure of it, because when he looked at Wilbur, when he spoke to him, when he was just close to him... he loved him. He loved that boy so much that it was impossible for him not to see it. It was impossible that such a strong feeling could be hidden, especially when you're not trying to do it.

Wilbur couldn't have missed it.

But he might not understand. He might not be able to recognize it or name it because he had obviously never felt loved by anyone before. Apparently no one had even tried to love him before.

Sometimes Phil felt disappointed at what an idiot he was.

He slowly pulled the boy away from himself, still keeping his hands on his shoulders lest he think she was trying to push him away.

"You know that, don't you, Wilbur?"

Wilbur's lips twitched. He wasn't looking at him, his eyes fixed on his own hands, clutching the edge of his T-shirt.

"You're weird again", he finally replied, his voice vibrating in his throat as it always did when he felt like crying.

Phil carefully brushed his wet hair from his forehead, breathing in relief as the boy leaned for the touch. He bend so that he could catch his gaze and look deep into his eyes.

"You know I would never lie to you, right?" He wasn't sure if it was still a question or just a promise. Maybe he never said that either. Maybe he thought it too obvious.

Wilbur nodded.

"Mhm..." He muttered, then sniffed, once, twice, on the third, his eyes glazed over, and his trembling hands gripped the man tightly as he snuggled into him a second time.

Phil returned the hug without hesitation.

"You okay?" He made sure, stroking the boy on the back.

Wilbur pressed his face tighter against his shoulder. Phil couldn't tell if his shirt was getting damp from tears or if the water was still dripping from his hair.

"I don't know. I guess I'm happy. But... But I'm also so sad. Because I... I wanted to hear it so much and for so long, but never..." He paused for a moment, clearly searching for the right words, and when he failed to find them, he clung to the man with even greater desperation. As if he were his only protection. "Phil, I don't know... I don't know anymore..."

"Shhh... It's okay. Everything is fine. You can cry if you want. It's not a bad thing."

This time it was the boy who moved first, and Phil was surprised to find that although his face was red and teary, his eyes suddenly focused.

"You won't send me away, are you?" He asked, and for some reason it sounded completely different than usual. There was no uncertainty and mistrust and no ill-concealed hope in it, only a firm demand for confirmation.

Phil wasn't going to say no to him.

"I won't."

"And you promised to never leave me."

"Never."

Wilbur frowned.

"If you lie, I will hate you forever."

Phil nodded just as seriously.

"I'll hate myself a hundred times more", he assured, and the boy's gaze instantly softened, his muscles relaxed and he suddenly seemed small and vulnerable again.

And Phil realized with full force that he had just been given a trust that he probably would never deserve.

And that he was willing to spend his whole life proving to Wilbur that he made the right choice.

He really wasn't good at expressing emotions in words. Nor in doing anything with them other than keeping them for himself and for his own use. There were probably a thousand and a few more things he could say now. Hundreds of those he wanted to say in his heart. And a few that he should actually say.

But for some reason he ignored them all and, ruffling the boy's hair, simply said:

"Go take a bath."

Wilbur looked at him in surprise.

"I'm already wet", he observed, because, unlike some of them, he wasn't a complete moron.

Not that Phil was going to accept it. He was an adult, he was always right.

"This lake is a breeding ground for all plague. I don't even want to think how many bacteria you brought us here."

Wilbur didn't look the least bit convinced, but since walking in wet socks is never particularly pleasant, he just shrugged and ran up the stairs.

"Can I play on the computer afterwards?", he shouted, leaning over the railing.

Phil shook his head.

"No. I'm still angry."

He smirked at the dramatic moan from above. This was his life now. Lots of whining, worrying to death and emotional roller coaster.

He already felt that he might not survive it.

He couldn't imagine a better death.

Okay! One kid in, two to go! Techno's Arc begins in the next chapter!

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

August was lazy. Wilbur still spent most of his time running like a wild in the sun, cheating at cards in the evenings and stealing money from the bank while playing Monopoly. Phil was pretty sure he was raising a future tax fraudster, but at the moment he didn't worry about it. It was Future Phil's problem. Current Phil had much more serious worries.

"We have a kid here," Nate informed him as soon as he heard the reply to his 'Good morning'.

Even though their colleagueship didn't start off well, it has improved significantly over the past year, moving on from "Can I speak to your manager?" into a slightly less formal camaraderie. Phil might still have the worst possible opinion of the system as such, but blaming individual employees for it was simply pointless. Especially since Nate turned out to be quite a nice man. He was overworked, far under earning, and spending most of the day buried up to his ears in really hopeless cases, but he really cared for all the kids he had in care. As much as it is possible to care for over twenty strange children, most of whom are seen once in their lifetime for ten minutes.

Phil frowned, stepping back from the computer and tilting his head back in the chair.

"I'd be surprised if you didn't. Happy but very surprised."

"He's a boy, about Wilbur's age."

Phil nodded, though no one could see it.

"Yhm..."

There was a long sigh in the receiver.

"Phil. You know what I'm trying to say."

"I know", he admitted, glancing at the door to make sure it was locked. He was ninety-nine percent sure he would have heard if Wilbur returned from... wherever he ran this time, but just in case he lowered his voice anyway. "Look, Nate, not that I don't want to help because I'd really like to, but... It's kind of a bad time for me to take another kid."

He could clearly imagine what face Nate had just made. He might try to remain indifferent to his charges (which is understandable and probably even healthy in his profession), but he could never well hide the fact that he had a weakness for Wilbur. In fact, when he spoke again, there was some concern in his voice.

"Something happens? Something about Wilbur?"



"Apart from the fact that he started to be fascinated with documents about animals, he's fine." He paused for a moment, glanced nervously at the door once more and, gathering himself together, added, "I'm going to adopt him."

He had never said it out loud before. He thought about it, carefully weighed the pros and cons (somehow he couldn't find the latter), he even made sure three times that he certainly qualified as a potential adoptive parent, but had not yet summoned the courage to ask anyone about it directly. Neither the officials responsible for the entire procedure, let alone Wilbur.

He wasn't sure why he hesitated so much. He was absolutely convinced that it was the best decision he could make, probably one of the best he had made in his entire life - and yet he still couldn't get down to business. Perhaps it was because he never really planned to adopt. He doesn't like formalities, and he definitely didn't need a pile of papers to be sure of his feelings. He loved Wilbur and considered him his son regardless of whether he officially gave him his last name and was listed somewhere in the office as "father" and not "guardian". If, without some funny piece of paper, the boy couldn't see how much he cared about him, he must've screwed up the job and should try harder.

Only recently has he realized that his opinion may not be the most important thing in all of this.

Wilbur was a child, lonely, dumped from one house to another, and mostly treated as a necessary evil, whether it was by a system that he had unconsciously lowered the stats to or by families who had broken his trust. "Funny paper" was much more for him than just a formal repetition of what was already obvious. It was a summary of Phil's endeavors, a confirmation that what he had said and done so far was sincere that he really cares and is ready to do absolutely anything to prove it. It was a proof of his trustworthiness.

It was "I love you" shouted out so loud that Wilbur would hear its echo for the rest of his life.

Phil might have found the adoption to be a completely redundant formality, definitely more labor-intensive than it should be. But if it was going to make his child happy, he was willing to go through the entire procedure every day for the rest of his life.

Nate was silent for a good three seconds, and Phil was able to pinpoint exactly where he'd finally assimilated the information he had received.

"Oh. Oh! Great! Fantastic! God, you don't even know how it makes me happy. I couldn't believe I would see the day this boy got out of the system!"

"He kept breaking your stats?" Phil couldn't help but be a little spiteful. He liked Nate, he really did, but he still remembered the jumble of nerves and fear that had crossed the threshold of his house. It still haunted him in his worst nightmares.

If Nate was offended, he didn't show it.

"He kept breaking my heart. Really, Phil. That's great news. This boy is already running after you like a duckling after his mother, when you tell him I think..." He broke off in mid-

sentence, becoming serious immediately. " Wait. How does adopting him stop you from fostering Techno?"

Oh that's great. Now he knew the boy's name. Now he was no longer a nameless child in the system. Damn it...

He straightened up in his chair, mostly to be able to reach the desk.

"How do you imagine it, Nate?", he asked, tapping his fingers on the tabletop. "I'm supposed to take a child under my roof who needs a family and have him watch someone else get it?"

Nate hummed understandingly. Phil didn't believe for a second that he was going to let go.

"Phil. You say exactly what you should be saying to reassure me that I can entrust this boy only to you."

Ah, yes. Exactly.

"Nate, you say exactly what you should be saying to manipulate me into this. That's why I'll hang up now."

"Wait! Could you at least try to consider it? I will be grateful. Techno is... a special case."

Phil froze with his finger a millimeter from the screen, then slowly raised the phone back to his ear.

"Isn't that what you said about Wilbur?"

Not that he actually needed confirmation. He still remembered that conversation to the word. "Difficult", "attentive", "requiring constant supervision"... Well, at least the latter actually had its raison. Leave Wilbur alone for a few hours and you can call the fire department and an ambulance right away. And anti-terrorists.

"Yes. That's why I immediately thought of you."

Phil rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers, feeling a pained groan build up deep in his throat. Or a scream. Or laughing at his own stupidity - he himself wasn't sure anymore. He didn't even know why he felt so bloody torn and frustrated. His mind told him that he had every right to say "no", that he had all possible logical arguments on his side, that he never even mentioned a word that he was willing to foster another child. The heart, on the other hand... Well. His heart still remembered Wilbur's fearful gaze, the bruises on his arms, and that fucking yellow sweater. He knew he couldn't save the whole world. That one alone won't save every hurt child. But if he could help one more... did he really have a moral right to refuse?

He sighed heavily, rubbing his eyes.

"Go on."

"I can send you his file." Nate instantly get more energetic, and there was a quick tapping in the background. Motherfucker was already prepared. "Just please, don't be scared. When I say this is a special kid, I really mean it. He's ten, almost eleven. Devilishly smart, but he doesn't do well in school. At this point, he seems to have stopped trying. It's a bit our fault, one of his previous families turned out to be... very improper.

Phil preferred not to ask what exactly that meant. None of Wilbur's families have ever been reported as even minimally suspicious. What did Techno 'parents' have to do to earn this award? Sell his kidneys? Try to sacrifice him to Satan?

"Why can't you find him a home?" He asked instead, because even though he had some experience cleaning up the mess of his predecessors, he definitely preferred not to be taken completely by surprise a second time.

"He's... a difficult child."

He rolled his eyes.

"Specific, Nate, please."

This time the sigh was definitely longer, and it clearly served only to delay the inevitable. Oho, this's gonna be good...

"He can be aggressive... They say so! No proof!"

Phil pushed the phone away from his ear and stared at it with such disbelief that he was almost certain that the digital record of his expression had somehow magically reached the caller.

"What the fuck, Nate? I have a child at home who is oversensitive about this", he explained, trying very hard to remain calm. Keyword: trying. "I won't take another one just to let them traumatize each other"

"No, no, no, listen to me! He... You should meet him first, Phil. He's a really good boy. Honestly, he's a lot like Wilbur. He just shows emotions in a slightly different way. Please. Think about this."

Everything about Phil was screaming "No!" Very loud, very firm, and very, very pointless because Nate was a goddamn bastard and he knew exactly what he was doing and what words to use to move the very tender string. He knew, he fucking knew how to make a conversation stop being purely theoretical, stop being about some random, nameless kid that Phil might forget in a while and sleep well again at night. Now the conversation was about Techno. It was about a terrified little boy whom Phil thoughtlessly and automatically took the same affection he had for Wilbur.

Damn you, Nate. Phil'll have to remember to block his number before he makes a goddamn orphanage out of his house.

"How hard would it be to find another home for him?" He asked with one last, desperate wave of hope, but he was not particularly surprised to hear only a short 'Very hard'. "Okay. Send me these files. I'm not saying yes!" He pointed out in advance, naively lying to himself. "But I'll think about it. I need to talk to Wilbur first anyway. If he doesn't agree, there's no topic at all." Deep down he knew perfectly well that he could start arranging the second bedroom. Someday, all this goddamn empathy is going to put him in his grave. But at least he will die with a clear conscience. That's something, right?

## Chapter End Notes

Well, yeah, it's gonna be slow.

But I don't know if anyone expected anything else, I just wrote 24,000 words about Wilbur, lmao.

## Chapter 14

As it turned out, Techno was in fact an special child. Unfortunately, in a way that absolutely no one ever wants to be "special".

He was three years old when he was found on the church steps, where he spend all November night waiting for his parents, who had promised to come back "in a few minutes" and had apparently forgotten. He knew his own name and was able to tip his fingers at how old he was, but he couldn't remember either the surname or the address, and his description of his family sounded like every person that everyone passes by on the street every day.

As usual in such a situation, at first the case was widely echoed, the media got interested in it, searches began, and someone from Reddit certainly broke into the secret base, stole documents and analyzed the shape of contacts or models of vacuum cleaners. Unfortunately, even with the help of the latter, the puzzle couldn't be solved - Techno's parents were never tracked down, and they never came back for the child. People gradually lost interest, and a little over a year later, no one remembered the boy who had just been officially entered into the system, with a new, top-down surname and no background whatsoever. And no future, apparently, too, because the more Phil analyzed his file, the more he suspected someone was deliberately trying to destroy the child's life.

His first foster home sounded like an absolute nightmare. Not least because simply gathering nine children between the ages of four and twelve in one place made Phil think of hell. He knew how much time and effort he had spent to help Wilbur, to tame him, to teach him to show affection and trust in people anew. He was absolutely convinced that doing it with more than three at once was just physically impossible. It was impossible to stretch time, and even the best parent had to sleep, eat and breathe in peace and quiet from time to time. He didn't accuse anyone of deliberate neglect - he accused the system of thoughtlessness and pure idiocy, and was not at all surprised that, according to the report, after a year of notoriously being ignored, Techno not only failed to overcome the acquired trauma, but even regressed. Only then did someone finally come up with the revolutionary idea that it might probably be better to move him to a less crowded place.

Two pages of the report later, Phil concluded that in principle they might not have been doing this.

Techno never complained about the way he was treated. Partly out of fear, part of the conviction that his words would not change anything anyway. But mostly because he was bloody five years old. He probably didn't even know he could say anything, and all the adults around him had obviously suffered a sudden bout of blindness. Another year passed before someone finally decided that the bruises were a bit too much after all, that the boy was falling down the stairs a little too often, and was a bit too scared of any physical contact. Nobody was charged with anything, nobody was proven anything - but at least Techno was taken from there. Little successes need to be celebrated. Supposedly.

His house number three... Phil wasn't sure what happened in house number three. There was practically no information about him, except for a few notes that the boy's condition had improved significantly, he seemed happy and strongly connected with his new family. Especially the latter sounded extremely painful, coupled with the information that the next year later, the 7-year-old Techno arrived at home number four.

The file didn't say why this had happened. Nate wrote in pencil in the margins, "They said it just didn't work," and Phil could understand it somehow. Sometimes a combination of two things just doesn't work, even if they both work perfectly well. The toaster and the bathtub are fine by themselves, but when put together... they are unlikely to provide a pleasant experience. Some people just don't fit together, and Phil knew it. And he was really trying to understand and not feel mad at strangers about something that might have been a difficult decision for them as well. But he couldn't help that deep down he had already labeled both sides torturer and victim. He just knew something bad had to happen, he knew, because house number four was the first house to complain about the boy's behavior, and he had only spent two weeks there. According to the report, he attacked one of his adoptive sisters. Phil was deeply convinced that if he had spent more than half his life passed from hand to hand like an object, he would also start throwing anything at peoples. And screaming and kicking and biting, because apparently only then anyone ever paid attention to the child.

Home number five... existed. And that in itself was proof that God does not exist.

Phil was sure that gradually uncovering Wilbur's past was a shocking experience - as it turned out, reading about it in the form of a dry, unemotional report was a hundred times worse.

Techno has gone through hell. It was impossible to put into other words. He had completed all nine of its circles and got out solely because one of the older boys in the family had fallen into drug trafficking and apparently, recognizing that there was nothing left to lose, decided to take everyone with himself. Apparently drugs could save someone's life rather than destroy it. Surprising.

The report was several pages long, and Phil was unable to get through it at once. Instead he went downstairs to the living room, where Wilbur was watching 'Finding Nemo' for perhaps the fourth time this week. Hearing footsteps on the stairs, the boy turned, clearly excited about the company, but his smile immediately faded when he saw the man's face.

"Something happened?", he asked as man sat on the couch next to him, but Phil just shook his head.

"I just have to think about a few things."

"Oh." Wilbur nervously turned the remote in his hands. "Should I leave?"

Phil shook his head a second time and, without any introduction or explanation, leaned in, holding the boy tightly against him.

A year ago, Wilbur wouldn't have understood his intentions. A year ago, he would have been scared, confused, and would have automatically assumed he had done something wrong

because he didn't know any other safe reaction. Now, although visibly surprised, he just hugged him back. Phil considered it his success in life.

"It's just... I'm glad to have you, you know?", he whispered, resting his cheek on dark mop of hair. "And that you came to me then."

He might not be the perfect father. There was hardly a week without him making some stupid mistake that he later blamed himself for. Not to mention, most of the time he really had no idea what he was doing. Wilbur deserved the best, deserved the father that Phil had tried but still couldn't be.

But he could love this boy more than anything else in the world, he could make him feel safe with him, make him forget for a while what had happened to him, and just enjoy being a child.

He believed he could offer the same Techno.

Techno deserved to be safe. He deserved the past to slowly fade away from and lose control of him. He deserved to be loved. To be able to be a child. Phil couldn't help but give him this chance.

He slowly pulled Wilbur away from him and, keeping his hands on his shoulders, looked him straight in the eyes.

"I have to ask you about something. It's very important and I want you to answer completely honestly, okay?"

The boy nodded.

"I did something bad?"

"Absolutely not", he reassured him, belatedly realizing that he had actually made the whole introduction a little too sublime than necessary. "You did nothing wrong. I just want to know what you think about something, okay? Okay. So Nate... You remember Nate, right? Of course you do. So Nate called me yesterday and wanted to know if maybe... maybe I wouldn't take another baby. To foster, I mean.

At first Wilbur just nodded again. Then he opened his eyes wide and looked at Phil with a fear the man hadn't seen in a long time.

"Instead of me?!"

Phil was pretty sure he looked equally, if not even more terrified. In any case, it was only a miracle that he avoided a heart attack.

"No! No no no! Of course not!"

Fuck, and that's why he should have adopted him when he still had the chance! Damn it... How and when 'Do you want to be officially my son?' suddenly turned into 'Would you like a new brother?'

"You're not going anywhere! No way."

The boy's shoulders relaxed visibly, and his gaze softened.

"Oh. Okay. Good." He breathed a sigh of relief, then puffed up his cheeks and looked at Phil resentfully. "Don't scare me like that."

"I'm sorry, i didn't want to."

Wilbur scowled at him, but shrugged after a short consideration.

"Fine. I forgive you", he said, and Phil struggled to hold back a laugh. "So there will be another child?"

The man hesitated. On the one hand, he was ready to go after Techno even at this point, and had a strong feeling that with every word and gesture, he shows this need. On the other hand, he really didn't want to put any pressure on Wilbur. He wanted an honest answer, unaffected by the fear that otherwise he would be angry with him.

"Would you like it to be?", he asked finally, making it sound as neutral as possible.

The boy shrugged.

"That's okay. I think so."

Phil breathed a sigh of relief. Wilbur may not seem particularly thrilled, but he didn't say no - that's the most important thing.

"His name is Techno. He's a few months older than you."

"Have you met him yet?"

"Not yet. I wanted to know first what you think about it."

Wilbur blinked.

"Why?"

"Because it's a family decision, and you are part of it."

"Oh." He bowed his head and his hair fell over his face, but Phil could still see that he was smiling. Sometimes it struck him how little it took to make him happy. There was something downright sad about it. "I think the big brother would be nice", he decided. He was clearly trying to hide his nervousness, but his voice was trembling slightly and his fingers brushed the hem of his shirt, so Phil wasn't surprised when he added, "But... but you won't like him more than me?"

Oh. Oh, of course.

He took the boy by the chin and gently urged him to look at him.



"No", he said seriously. "I don't play 'favorites'."

Wilbur looked away.

"And what about the 'least favorite'?"

Phil almost laughed. Not because he thought the question was stupid. He just couldn't imagine loving someone more than he loved Wilbur. There were limits to human ability.

"Definitely not."

The boy looked at him closely, obviously looking for something. Whatever it was, he must found it because after a while he grinned broadly.

"Fine then."

Phil smiled back, feeling the enormous weight fall from his heart.

"All right", he agreed, ruffling the baby's hair.

He couldn't say he wasn't disappointed in a way. He was already attached to the idea that soon Wilbur would be his son also formally. He wanted to see his expression when he asked him, wanted to know that the boy finally understood how much he meant to him.

Well, apparently they both will have to wait a little longer. It's not that anything could change about it if he didn't make a decision now nd immediately. They had time. They had a lot of time.

Enough to fit Techno too.

## Chapter 15

If Phil were to decide only for himself, Techno would be standing on the doorstep of his house with a suitcase the same day. But Wilbur's comfort was also at stake, so although he was overwhelmed by the excitement and the need for action, he decided to postpone the decision a bit so that the boy could prepare for the upcoming changes in peace. His first encounter with Techno was therefore at an adoption facility on the most neutral ground possible. Neutral to Phil, anyway. He was deeply convinced that the boy would have a completely different opinion. He didn't seem particularly enthusiastic as he sat at a table in an empty room whose door Nate closed behind Phil with a soft "Good luck!"

Well, that was exactly what he might need.

"Hey, kiddo." He sat down at the table, deliberately sliding the chair a little further than necessary. The table top was quite narrow, and he had reason to suspect that the boy might not be a big fan of pushing the boundaries of his personal zone at the moment.

The way Techno eyed him, watchful and damned distrustful, only confirmed it.

"Good morning", he muttered, sliding a little lower in his chair.

Phil's first thought, when he was finally able to get a close and calm look at him, was, literally: oh. "Oh" combining surprise and sympathy, and referring to a disheveled, waist-length bundle of hair, the strands of which the boy wrapped around his fingers. Dyed hair, should be added. Or at least that was the original idea, but the workmanship left a lot to be desired and as a result some of the strands, especially on the top of the head, still had a natural brown shade, while the rest were dazzling with neon pink.

Interesting choice. Phil wasn't judging. He was too busy figuring out when he could make an appointment with a good hairdresser the fastest. Pink, green - if the kid wants, they can be even rainbow colored. But someone has to do it well.

Aside from the hairdressing nightmare, Techno looked much better than Phil expected. Certainly less tragic than Wilbur used to be, which was a very low bar, but still - it could have been worse. His face was pale, there were strong shadows under his eyes, and a scar ran through his cheek and across the corner of mouth, but he looked quite healthy as well. Too skinny and evidently unkempt, but at least in clean clothes and no bruises. Not in any visible place, at least. Phil had no doubt that if he had started to drill down on the subject, there would certainly be something. Nobody wears long sleeves in thirty-degree heat for no good reason.

For his own good, he temporarily decided not to think about it.

"You're Techno, right?"

And okay, maybe it wasn't a particularly wise question, but the look the boy gave him made him suddenly feel like he was back in school, under the blackboard where he had just written

the answer very far from correct.

"Unless you have meetings with half of the orphanage today, it's probably not a difficult puzzle, sir."

He had a strange feeling he should be offended. Instead, he could hardly suppress a laugh.

"Ah. That's true. And really, let's leave that 'sir' thing, okay?"

Techno grimaced, straightening his chair sharply, probably to appear taller.

"I won't call you '*dad*'", he practically spat the last word, pressing his arms to his sides and lifting his chin, clearly preparing for a longer fight.

Phil gave him a few seconds to control himself before nodding.

"I wasn't going to ask for it", he answered calmly, and if somewhere deep, very deep in his soul, he felt a bit of regret, he immediately choked that spark. "Just 'Phil' will be okay?"

Techno looked at him closely, searching for a trick.

"I think so." He shrugged, starting to twist the strands of hair around his fingers again. It seemed to calm him down a little. "Why are you here?"

Contrary to Wilbur, who tried to merge with the wall and most willingly to cease to exist at the first meeting, Techno masked fear by pretending to be indifferent and confident. Phil knew he definitely shouldn't put one defense over the other, not when both were unhealthy and in the long run couldn't fix anything, but for two bad things he preferred a saucy kid to the one flinching at the mere sound of his voice.

"Well..." he thought for a moment, not really sure what he should say. '*I wanted to make sure my son would be safe with you*' sounded like a very, very poor start to a relationship.

"Because I wanted to meet you a bit before..."

"You read my file."

Phil hesitated. On the one hand, he was tempted to deny it, because knowing that someone had traced your entire life, especially the most traumatic moments, was not supposed to be pleasant. Rather, it gave minus a million to comfort and blocked any increase in confidence for a very long time.

On the other hand... he didn't want to lie. Certainly not so obviously.

"Yes, I read..." he agreed, but before he could add anything else, Techno slapped his hand on the tabletop with such force that the table swayed.

"I'm *not* aggressive!", he growled, then he must have realized that he was contradicting himself because he crossed his arms and slumped harder in his chair. At the moment, he was more lying on top of him than sitting. "Not without a good reason."

Phil was absolutely sure that this outburst should have disturbed him, and in some way - it did. The thing is, at the same time he just believed him. His words, his face, his whole posture clearly showed the pain, regret and frustration at the way he had been treated so far, how much he was hurt by the people he should be safe with, and the system that should protect him had failed. How for years he was thrown from one nightmare house to another, only to be told at the end that he had provoked it himself. That he is the cause of the problems. That he even deserved it.

It wasn't particularly wise to put instincts, gut feelings, and guesses over facts. But Phil knew, *he just knew* Techno wasn't a bad kid. He was like a trapped pet that would growl, bite, and scratch if you get too close. Not because he actually wants to hurt you, not because he has any real purpose or intention for that - he's just scared and suffering.

Techno was scared. And Phil could only assume that under all his anger and regret, he was suffering.

That's why he forced himself to remain calm and slowly nodded.

"I'm so glad to hear that. That's great news."

Techno frowned. He clearly expected a completely different reaction and didn't have a ready answer. Phil decided to use it to change the subject.

"My son has prepared a list of questions that I must ask you. Wait..."

He reached into his pocket to pull out a piece of paper written in neat, even handwriting. Whether it was a school essay or a grocery list, Wilbur was always more calligrapher than writing. Phil once made the mistake of jokingly asking why he was so focused on it.

"Once at school they said I had a terrible writing." He heard in response. "And then at home they got mad and it was... very bad."

Strange as it may be, it always hurt the most when Wilbur's past showed up in these tiny, inconspicuous elements. He could heal the worst wounds, but there was nothing he could do about the scars left by them. He hated feeling so fucking helpless.

Techno watched his every move, straightening rapidly as Phil's hand faded from sight for a second and hesitated for a long moment before taking the piece of paper from him. The silence in the room was not particularly comfortable, but neither of them expected anything else.

The boy scanned the first few lines.

"Why does he want to know if I like fish?"

Phil sighed heavily. He should have read these questions himself first...

"He's trying to convince me to let him have a pet. He probably wants you to join him in battle against logic and iron argument."

Techno still didn't seem to see any sense in his reasoning.

"What does it matter what I think?"

"It's between a fish and a hamster, so if you don't want to be woken up in the middle of the night by a spinning wheel: you like fish. Very much."

The boy wrinkled his nose, but made no attempt to pursue the subject.

"You're weird", he only muttered, looking from the man to the piece of paper and back again. "And turtles are cooler anyway."

Phil smiled broadly. First information! First real contact!

"Really?"

Techno pursed his lips, clearly wishing he had said anything. Then he brought the paper almost to his nose, squinting. When he uncovered his face after a few seconds, his expression was absolutely incredulous.

"Are you a communist?..."

Phil stopped smiling.

"Okay, you know what, no, I... can I get it back?" He asked, but without trying to reach for the paper himself. He wasn't an idiot.

Techno more tossed than handed him the paper. Phil paid little attention to this, preoccupied with promising himself that he would not allow Wilbur to watch the documentaries in the end.

"Favorite color?" he asked in the hope that he would still be able to save the situation. Banal questions could be boring, but they were also the safest. At least he thought so.

Techno seemed to have a different opinion, as he pressed his back a little harder against the back of the chair, his eyes averted.

"I like pink", he grunted and immediately looked at the man almost defiantly, as if demanding some kind of reaction.

'Come on, say something', his eyes seemed to scream. 'Comment it somehow. I know you want to.'

Phil didn't want to. He neither wanted nor intended, so he just smiled, nodding his head.

"Like your hair?"

Techno wrinkled his nose.

"My previous... 'brother'..." he grimaced, clearly refraining from using another, probably much less neutral term "He poured something into my shampoo. Because it's 'girl's color' or something."

A. So much for the "safe question". Well done Phil. As always, you're doing great.

"Oh. It's..." He hesitated, pondering, trying to choose which problem to raise first. He very much disliked the fact that one of his first thoughts was literally, 'Oh, thank God, he didn't do this to himself! Hope is he will let to fix it!'. "This is a really damn stupid joke. And the last time I checked, the colors were just colors. If you want, I can look for a hairdresser and..."

"Whatever", Techno cut in on him, suddenly appearing annoyed for some reason. "It'll probably come off by itself eventually."

Phil analyzed his words one more time, but still had no idea what exactly might have made him angry. Maybe he was just imagining...?

"This is important if you feel bad about it", he reassured, and realized immediately that no, he definitely did not "imagine".

Techno was angry. All his posture, the way he crossed his arms and clenched his fists, how he looked away and bit his lip...

"I hit him", he blurted out suddenly.

Phil blinked in complete surprise.

"What?"

"My... He wasn't my 'brother', I won't call him that... I hit him. That's why they sent me away", he added, looking Phil straight in the eye for the first time. "The last ones."

If Phil hadn't had time to dig through the internet and libraries by collecting information about the different forms of PTSD and the ways in which children tried to relieve violence, he would probably be very concerned at this point. Not that he wasn't, in the end he had just heard something to say the least alarming and he was taking it really seriously. At the same time, however, the overwhelmingly greater part of his fears stemmed rather from the fact that he finally understood.

A few months after the yellow sweater finally disappeared from the wardrobe, Phil had an really bad day. Mainly at work, where absolutely all of his associates decided to be extremely incompetent just to put extra duties on him, but also because he was sleeping in a bad position and his neck hurt. And his head. By the way, he was old, and maybe it's time to think about booking a place in a retirement home... He wouldn't say he was irritated. Rather very, very tired and wishing this whole damn day would be over.

Wilbur apparently had a different opinion.

Phil wasn't sure how he hadn't noticed before that something was wrong. No, wait. He knew 'how'. He was just ashamed to admit that he had practically ignored the boy all day,

preoccupied with self-pity. And then suddenly it was evening and he was standing by the stove frying scrambled eggs while Wilbur watched him closely from the opposite end of the kitchen, his favorite cup in his hands. His hands were trembling, and Phil could already see the tea spilled on the floor, and he was even starting to whine about it in his head. And in a way, he was right. Except Wilbur didn't spill anything.

Wilbur literally threw the cup on the floor, breaking it into tiny pieces.

Phil remembered feeling almost deafened by the thud and the sound of breaking glass. He remembered standing still for a long time, burning scrambled eggs somewhere to his left, remembered that spilled tea had reached Wilbur's white socks, dyeing them pink. And he remembered his son's face, his flushed face, his lips tight and his hands clenched into fists.

And then the world went back to normal, as if someone had snapped their fingers and turned the time back on. Phil cursed under his breath and, quite automatically, rushed to save dinner. When he put the pan down and looked at the baby again, there was no sign of anger on his face. Instead he seemed scared, staring wide-eyed at the glass on the floor, gasping for air in quick, shallow breaths. Then he turned and ran out of the kitchen, leaving Phil alone with glass to collect, tea to dry, and thoughts to organize.

"I'm sorry", was the first thing Wilbur said when Phil entered his room a few minutes later. He was sitting on the bed, his arms wrapped around his legs, forehead resting on knees. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I'm sorry..."

Phil sat down next to him, making sure to keep a safe distance. Sometimes, during a panic attack, the boy needed physical contact in bulk amounts. On the other days, when he was overwhelmed by something, the last thing he needed was extra sensory irritation. Phil has learned not to make assumptions and to wait patiently for a sign of what he needs at this particular moment.

"What happened?"

Wilbur sniffed loudly.

"You were angry", he sobbed, gripping the fabric of his pants tighter.

At first, Phil wanted to deny it. He scolded himself for it right after that, because hell, why would he lie? Wilbur might have been a kid, but that's no reason to treat him like an idiot. He could sense emotions five times better than most adults. Telling him he's wrong would be like waving a black board in front of him and telling him it's white.

"I was angry", he admitted carefully. "But not with you. I had a bad day, that's all. Did I do something that made you feel bad?"

The boy shook his head. Phil stifled the urge to try to touch him.

"You didnt. But... Because I just... I don't know. It's just..." He took a deep, shuddering breath and, wiping his wet cheeks, he lifted his head. "Phil. I know you wouldn't do anything to me, really, I know, but you were angry for so long and I started to think about it and then I

couldn't stop and I wanted... I wanted to get it over with. I just wanted you to get angry and... *do something* and be normal again."

He didn't remember much about the rest of the evening. Just hushed voices and a long conversation, and the moment Wilbur climbed onto his lap and cuddled up to him, seeking comfort. He remembered running his fingers through his dark hair and trying not to feel hurt by what he had just heard, trying to remember that it wasn't all about him.

And if he cried that night, Wilbur would never know.

He never wanted to feel anything like this again, such overwhelming powerlessness. Apparently he wasn't given it, because when he looked at Techno, he saw in him the same desperation that made Wilbur lose his favorite cup.

Techno believed Phil was going to hurt him, was absolutely convinced of it and willing to do anything to get confirmation. No words could change that, not immediately and not without a huge amount of effort and work.

Phil was ready to try.

"Well..." He exhaled slowly, rubbing a hand across his neck. "Okay, in general, I do not support violence, in any form and for any reason... but he really had it coming."

The International Association of Sensible Parents would probably not have given him the prize of the year for this statement, but somehow he didn't know how to care. His children should know they have the right to defend themselves. Violence may not be the "right answer" - but sometimes you don't want to answer at all. Sometimes you just wanted the questioner to shut his fucking mouth.

It's hard to judge if Techno had a similar opinion on this. His shoulders relaxed a little and his expression became indifferent, but his gaze was still sharp and piercing. For a long moment he just rocked on the back legs of the chair (Phil was holding back a long lecture on the effects of the impact of the skull on the floor) before finally deciding that the visitor was worth a little attention after all.

"So you have a son?" He nodded at the paper of questions in the corner of the table.

Phil immediately grinned, completely reflexive and without any thought.

"Oh, yes!" He reached into his pocket, somewhere on the edge of his consciousness noting that this time Techno hadn't flinched or tense. Not as much as before, anyway. "Wait a second..."

He ignored Wilbur's message, asking if he remembered about his super important questions, and entered the gallery. Somehow, he has already managed to collect more pictures of his child than some people have pictures of funny cats. In one of them, taken a week ago, the boy had horribly disheveled hair, a crookedly buttoned shirt, and a broad smile. The honor of capturing this view fell on the school photographer - Phil just copied it from the class album.



He already had a very well-rounded plan to torment his son with it for the next twenty years. Start now.

"His name is Wilbur." He put the phone on the counter. "He's about your age."

Techno hesitantly reached for his cell phone, frowning at the photo.

"How much is 'about'?"

"You're exactly seven months and three days older."

The boy grimaced as he put the phone on the table a little more brutally than was necessary.

"I don't like little brothers", he grunted, and from the way he said it, Phil might have bet blindly that he didn't like older brothers either. Neither sisters. Not anyone in general.

"I think you will get used to it. Do you like geography?"

"Not really. I don't like school."

"Okay. What do you like then?"

Techno shifted uneasily in his chair. The conversation was clearly not going in the direction he had anticipated, and he was starting to feel insecure with no pre-prepared answers.

"I don't know? To have a peace of mind." He shrugged, and when Phil laughed sincerely, he looked at him as if he were an extremely bizarre specimen in the zoo. "You're really damn weird."

Phil laughed even louder. He was beginning to believe that destiny was giving him hidden signs in this way. If the child considered him weird, he should take them home immediately.

"Why?"

"You're asking strange questions."

"Sorry, I don't have much experience. What do people usually ask?"

"I don't know. 'How long are you already here?', 'Why are you here so long?', 'Why won't you smile?', 'Why are you so mean?'..."

Phil's smile faded a little.

"I can list a few reasons for being rude to someone who asks why you don't smile", he admitted, because he himself might not have been a good example of 'How to properly have a first interview', but he didn't think people could be that stupid.

Techno slumped lower in his chair, winding a strand of hair around his fingers.

"Weirdo", he muttered, softly enough that it wasn't entirely clear if anyone but himself was going to hear it.

"You'll get used to it."

The boy's hand froze for a split second, then he jerked his head up to look directly at the man. He was clearly surprised, and without all the artificial confidence he suddenly seemed much younger and almost helpless. Even his voice was different, quieter, higher and definitely not indifferent.

"You still want to take me?", he asked, and he must have regretted it immediately, making a face as if he wanted to bite off his tongue. He crossed his arms over his chest, looking away, but his cheeks were flushed. "Whatever you want. I don't care."

Phil didn't fall for it.

"Of course I want to. That's why I'm here", he said seriously, but before he could add anything else, someone knocked on the other door and they both instinctively turned their heads towards the sound. "Oh. I think Nate is slowly losing patience with us." He grimaced, genuinely disappointed. He didn't want to leave Techno, even though he knew the breakup was only temporary. Okay, he might have known him only half an hour, but it was a very nice thirty minutes. Contact is made, bond is made, last chance to change your mind is lost. "He was supposed to prepare a whole pile of documents for me to complete." He sighed dramatically as he put the phone in his pocket, but hesitated before doing the same with Wilbur's note. He scanned the carefully drawn letters once more and finally pushed it back towards the boy. "You know... Can you write 'No' next to this 'communist' thing...?"

He was pretty sure the corners of Techno's mouth twitched slightly in a contained smile.

"Your son is weird too", he muttered, but reached for a pen.

Phil couldn't disagree with him.

"Just wait until he starts telling you about anteaters..."

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the comments, guys, I really love them! ❤️

Also, my sister @alwerakoo just published a fic, so If you like a good Post-exile stories, or Tommy & Techno - centric fics (or just a good stories in general, lol) you should check on this one.

It's really fucking great and she deserves more attention.  
[archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290](https://archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first thing Phil saw when he opened his eyes was Wilbur, standing beside his bed, in the pale light streaming in from the hallway through the ajar door. If he had been a bit more woke, he would probably have paid for the sight with a heart attack, but since his consciousness was still drifting somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, he only blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness faster.

"Hm? What happened?"

The boy shifted nervously from foot to foot, pulling the sleeves of his pajamas so much that it nearly rolled off his shoulders.

"I just..." His voice was trembling, and the words ran down his throat with obvious difficulty. "Couse I..." He tried a second time, but stopped again for a few seconds, until finally took a lot of breath, closed his eyes and blurted out in one exhalation: "I can't stop thinking that you want to replace me."

Phil immediately lost the desire to sleep. For a few days forward.

"Oh." He sat up on the bed, his arms wide open, into which the boy immediately cuddled up. Phil didn't even want to ask how long he had stood barefoot in the corridor before he finally decided to come to him: his feet were icy cold. "Oh, Wilbur..."

The boy made a high-pitched noise, something between a screech and a sigh.

"I know..."

"I would never replace you", he assured, stroking the boy on the back. He could feel his muscles tense, hands clenched around his shirt tremble strongly and could almost hear the quick, too fast pounding of his heart.

"I know. Really. But I can't... stop being afraid."

Phil's hand froze for a moment before resuming slow up and down journey. He never knew what to say at times like this. From the very beginning, he naively assumed that if he could finally convince the child once and for all that he was safe, wanted and loved, everything would automatically change for the better. It may not be perfect, but it will be easier, because if only Wilbur would believe him once, if only he would finally trust him - what reasons would he have to continue to be afraid?

Well, Wilbur had reasons. He had all sorts of goddamn reasons, and Phil felt like a moron for trying to deny his right to doubt and fear. Even if he didn't say it aloud, even though he believed that he had never expressed it in any direct way, it was still a burden on his conscience. He tried, really. He tried to listen and not make assumptions and not expect too much. Take things as they were. He loved his son and wanted to help him in every way possible, and most of all - not to harm him even more. But sometimes... he just didn't understand. He didn't understand why sometimes he had to say something a few times, why Wilbur said he knew, and then acted as if he had never heard of it.

He remembered asking directly about it once.

"I can't explain. It's like..." Wilbur hesitated, searched for the right words for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't know. As if someone was standing next to me telling me all I know is not true and I was just making it up. Like, you tell me you love me and I *know* it's true, but then... suddenly this voice says it's a lie and says it over and over and over *and over and...* And sometimes I finally start to believe."

Phil nodded, though it still sounded very abstract. But he could understand the general problem. Sometimes he was absolutely sure he had turned off the iron before he left the house, but he had to turn the car around, come back and check it anyway. Or he had to make sure five times that he closed the door properly. He couldn't imagine feeling this way all the time and with much more serious matters.

Therefore, although he didn't understand, he didn't try to comment. He just held his boy tightly in his arms and patiently repeated once again:

"I promise nothing will change."

Wilbur took a deep breath, relaxing a bit.

"And you're not tired of me?"

"Absolutely not. Why would I?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I am annoying."

Phil pushed him slightly so that he could meet his eyes.

"I would be happy if you'd finally stopped to collect dirty cups in the room, slowly because I do not have what to drink coffee", he admitted smiling. "But other than that, you're definitely not annoying."

Wilbur bit his lip.

"What if you like him more than you like me?" This question clearly troubled him the most. Most of the major changes in his life were not good for him, no wonder he wasn't a huge fan of them.

"I won't."

"What if he doesn't like me?"

Ah. Yeah.

Phil couldn't say he wasn't afraid of the question. He was getting ready for that and was basically surprised it hadn't rained sooner - but he still didn't feel a bit ready. Still, he tried to sound confident as he put his hands on the boy's shoulders, waiting for him to meet his eyes.

"Wilbur. I'm going to tell you something very important now and I want you to remember it, okay? First of all: I am asking you to give him a chance. You don't have to be the best of friends, but I will expect a minimum of cooperation and goodwill from you. It can be difficult at first. And it probably will. Techno... had a really bad life. Just like you."

Wilbur frowned, but after a moment understanding appeared on his face.

"Oh..."

"Yhm. I'm just asking you to try, okay?"

The boy nodded slowly.

"Okay."

"Great. Thank you. This is the first thing. The second..."

He hesitates. Not because he didn't know what he was trying to say. He was just still not sure if he should say it. Wilbur might have been smart, but he was still just a child. He had stupid ideas, was irresponsible, and sometimes broke the rules just because he didn't realize why they were so important.

But, on the other hand, he never lied. He might have "forgotten" to mention a bad grade or swear he had cleaned the room, although the dust on the shelves was enough to make a snowman, but he never lied about anything really important. Phil trusted him more than anyone else, more than any adult person. And maybe a lot of people would find it thoughtless and risky and call it "tempting fate" - but he felt Wilbur should know.

He tightened his grip on the boy's shoulders.

"Wilbur, listen. If anything goes wrong, you have to tell me. If you're scared, or if Techno does something bad, or... or hurts you in any way - I need to know about it. This is not 'snitching'", he pointed out quickly, seeing that the boy didn't seem convinced at all. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with saying that something bad happening, remember. I want to

help Techno, but not If you get hurt by this. And, Wilbur..." He paused for a moment, this time just to make sure the boy was listening. "Whatever you say, I'll believe you. Even if it sounds fucking unbelievable, even if Techno behaves perfectly around me and even if everyone, including me, will likes him. No matter what, if you say something is going on, I'll believe you. So it's very, very important that you tell the truth. I trust you, and I know you would never intentionally get someone into trouble. I don't want to change my mind on this. Do you understand me?"

Wilbur understood. Phil saw it in his gaze, in the way he clenched his hands on the sleeves of his pajamas, and even in the way he opened his mouth and then closed it to reflect once more on exactly what he had just heard."

"I promise I won't lie", he finally said, looking very serious.

And Phil immediately, without much thought, held him close.

"I know you won't."

He really knew.

## Chapter End Notes

Me: Why is this story so fucking long?!

Also me: Ah, yes. The trauma. The trauma of Wilbur. The trauma chosen especially for Wilbur. Wilbur's trauma. That trauma.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

I'M NOT FUCKING FINE I WANS THE CHILD BACK NOW!

This chapter was edited by @SylviaoftheDepths and she did amazing job!

Also, please go and read my sister's fic. It's so good and she really deserves more attention. Yesterday she listened for literally an hour to how much I hate one of Dream SMP's most beloved character, so I owe her a bit.

[archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290](https://archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290)

It took Phil much longer than he would have liked to complete the necessary paperwork and arrange it, but four days, a million signatures and even more certificates later, he was finally given the green light to take the child from the center. Wilbur, increasingly excited about the new family member, insisted on going with him, but Phil managed to convince him that it wouldn't be the best idea. He didn't want Techno to feel trapped or forced to interact, locked with strangers in a small space where he had absolutely no way of hiding or escaping. Besides, what he didn't admit and tried to disprove, was that he was afraid Techno might not want to make a good first impression.

Their last meeting left Phil with the strong conviction that while their experiences were disturbingly similar, the boys had adopted two very different methods of coping. While Wilbur continued to cut himself off from reality at times and had moments when the smallest thing completely upset and overwhelmed him, Techno had clearly declared war on the world. Phil was seriously concerned that they might accidentally fall victim to his declaration sometime soon. And while he himself was ready to patiently wait out even the worst attacks, fear for his son prevented him from sleeping peacefully.

For now, however, he tried not to assume the worst, and clung to his naively optimistic belief that everything would be fine. If not "good" then at least "decent". "Passable", as a last resort. "Harmless", maybe...

Nate appeared at the door of the building, leading Techno who was behind him, and Phil immediately pushed any negative thoughts as far away as possible, bringing a wide smile to his face.

"Hello again, kiddo", he held out his hand in greeting, but wasn't particularly surprised when Techno just scowled at him, clearly not planning to shake it. He didn't really have a way, in both hands clutching the handle of a far too large, shabby suitcase, which bumped against his hip with every step. His hair was disheveled, and his face was red and sweaty, which may have been largely due to the fact that he was wearing a long-sleeved sweatshirt and jeans

despite the terrible heat. Phil moved quickly to open the trunk, but made no effort to help pack the stuff inside. Wilbur once mentioned that he really didn't like when someone else handled his stuff for him .

"It was all I had, Phil," he told him in the garden, too busy splashing water on everything but the flowerbeds, to see a shadow of sadness cross the man's face at the mere mention of an almost empty bag. "All my stuff! And they took them and I never knew when I would get them back! And one time they took half my things because they said they were 'not good enough'. And they kicked me out a week later and I had nothing to wear!"

Phil would love to believe that these were isolated cases and Techno had never experienced anything like this, but somehow he couldn't feel an inkling of trust for people who, according to the file, broke three of a child's ribs, an arm, and at least two fingers over two years. He would sooner believe that they planned to put him in that suitcase and throw in the middle of the lake.

So he didn't try to help with the luggage. It was hard to judge whether Techno scored it a plus or the opposite, his thoughts seemed to be very, very far away. He shrugged as Nate wished him luck, but as he grasped the door handle and realized there was no one in the car except Phil, his face immediately tensed.

"You're alone?"

"Yup. Wilbur stayed home."

*Because I asked him for it*, he added in his head. Very, very softly so that the boy doesn't hear by accident.

He had to have shown it on his face though, because Techno frowned.

"How do I know you didn't kill him and bury him in the basement? And now you came for me?"

Phil wasn't quite sure it was a joke. In fact, he was almost convinced that it wasn't. But he was also stressed and tense, and any opportunity to relax a little was worth its weight in gold, so he just laughed.

"Sometimes I feel like it, not gonna lie. But more often, I'd rather be the one buried alive. The silence six feet under must be wonderful!"

Techno didn't answer, but finally opened the door and slowly slipped into the front seat. Phil gladly noted that he was wearing his seat belt without being reminded, and started the engine before the boy could change his mind. Although, judging by the expression with which he watched the road, he was still seriously calculating whether an attempt to escape was worth the possible injury.

Phil stealthily blocked the door, just in case.



"So! How are you feeling?" He tried to sound enthusiastic, but his voice trembled slightly, as did his hands clutching the steering wheel. Goddamn, why was he so stressed? The last time he was so nervous in college, when he waited for the results of the exam, for which he came unlearned, sleepy and drunk. He passed, by the way.

Techno didn't answer. Phil wasn't surprised, because if someone spoke to him like that, he'd rather keep his mouth shut so he wouldn't accidentally say something very malicious.

And yet, for some reason, despite this knowledge, he carried on.

"I know you must be nervous," he blurt the first thing he could think of. "If it cheers you up, I'm probably more stressed than this."

The boy finally looked at him, but somehow it was hard to say that it was a success when he looked like he wished the car would roll over.

"Somehow I doubt it."

Phil doubted it too. He should have taken Wilbur with him. It wouldn't have changed much, and they would probably still be sitting in this awkward silence, but at least he would feel like he had some support.

"Yeah, you're probably right," he admitted. Man must be able to come to terms with failure. "I'm just trying to... loosen the atmosphere. I'm not really good at this."

Techno snorted loudly.

"You're not good at all."

Okay, with all this forced positivity he likely overdid it. Wilbur would probably have said the same thing. Apparently, all ten-year-old boys just liked to kick you while you're down.

"You think you can help a little?" He tried in desperation, but Techno immediately turned his head, almost pressing his nose against the glass. Phil sighed heavily. "Okay. No pressure", he muttered under his breath, more to himself than Techno. *Little steps, little steps...*

He turned up the radio, tapping the steering wheel to the beat, hoping Techno would pick up the tune as well, but he seemed completely absorbed in his thoughts. His hands rested stiffly in lap, one of which twitched in a nervous tic. With each passing second he pressed more and more of his face against the glass, until finally, as the beads of sweat on his forehead flickered in the sun, Phil realized that he was probably trying to cool down in this way.

He turned the air conditioning up, but knew it would be a long while before it kicked in.

"Are you not hot?"

Techno closed his eyes, pressing his flushed cheek harder against the glass.

"No."

Phil frowned. Usually he let Wilbur stick to his point, make stupid decisions and suffer the consequences, but he made a very clear line when something threatened his health. He was going to do the same with Techno as well.

"Kiddo, no offense, but you look like you're a second from being cooked alive."

"And?"

"And maybe you'd rather take off your sweatshirt and survive?"

He was fully prepared for objection. He even expected it, watching the child press his lips together and pin his shoulders together in a pose shouting "But I want it and it will be as I say!" That's why it surprised him when a moment later, Techno's expression turned into a mocking smile. He straightened up and looked Phil straight in the eye, with the loudest silent challenge he had ever seen, pulling down his sweatshirt in two fluid movements.

The thick cloth rested in his lap, crumpled carelessly, but Phil didn't pay any attention to it, too busy staring at what it had covered so far.

Techno's hands, from wrists to shoulders, and probably higher up the edge of the T-shirt, were scarred. Some of them were old, some disturbingly fresh, and here and there small circular marks overlapped each other. In other places it was possible to count each one individually. Some were pink, less visible, others much deeper, and all of them seemed to burn Phil's skin with a phantom pain that he couldn't even imagine.

He knew they existed. He remembered a whole paragraph in his file on the subject, which he had to read in installments, in three tries, because he was unable to deal with the boundless, overwhelming fury that grew within him with each sentence. But knowing was different than seeing. The dry text might have made him understand that he would never - absolutely never - let anyone even mention cigarettes in front of the boy, but it hadn't prepared Phil for any of the feelings that flooded him in that split second. Not for anger, not for regret, not even for the sympathy, none of which he could transform into positive reaction.

Techno shifted uneasily, covering his shoulders with his hands.

"Are you done staring or are you planning to kill us?" He growled, and Phil immediately shifted his gaze to the road, realizing that for a few seconds he had indeed forgotten he was driving. *Fuck.*

"Ah! Sorry!"

"It's fine" The boy just rolled his eyes, but the way he pushed his back a little deeper into the seat made it clear that no, it wasn't "fine" at all. "I don't really care about surviving."

Phil didn't answer right away. His fingers tightened on the steering wheel, trying to pour all his anger into their grip to contain himself enough to at least appear calm.

"Sorry," he repeated finally, when he was sure he could control his own voice. "I don't know... I don't know what to say."

He wasn't sure if Techno sensed the desperation in his voice, or if he was irritated by the words themselves and the inept attempt to comfort him. Maybe he took sympathy for pity, or maybe he was just putting him through some kind of test again. Either way, he smirked.

"The last family said they were 'disgusting'. You can start with that."

*Fuck it.* Fuck being calm.

Phil, not quite consciously, swung to the side of the road, braking so hard that the screech of the tires momentarily drowned out the radio.

"They did *what*?!", he shouted, but quickly fell silent, seeing the horror with which the child looked at him.

*He thinks you want to hurt him*, he realized. *He thinks you're mad at him*.

Damn it. How did he still make such stupid mistakes?

He tried to remember what the file said about House Number Six, but nothing in particular stuck in his mind. A couple with two of their own children, good opinion among the neighbors, didn't report any major problems until they sent the boy away, claiming that he was too aggressive.

Phil wanted to be fucking aggressive towards them too.

"Techno..." He tried again, this time much calmer. In his own opinion, at least, because the boy still looked like he was about to jump out of his skin. "Fuck. I know it doesn't matter and it doesn't change a shit, but I'm really, really sorry. They had no right... Nobody had a right to do anything like that. Or to tell you such things. It's cruel and inappropriate and I just hope you know it."

He remembered the night he saw, *really saw*, the bruises on Wilbur's hands for the first time. He remembered how helpless he had felt, and how much he wanted to think of anything that would make the boy feel better, that showed that he would understand how much harm had been done to him and tell him that it was not his fault. He wanted to say, *to do* anything to make him feel safe for the first time. To give him a little warmth.

When he stared at the Techno scars, he didn't think about comforting him. He didn't think about warming him. He wanted to start a fire and burn the world to ashes. It wasn't a good feeling, it wasn't anything that a guardian should feel, anything that *a father* should feel. It was his own regret and pain, his own memories and all the emotions he thought he had worked through long ago, but instead had pushed aside.

Phil didn't believe in Karma. But he believed that if he had the opportunity, he would personally bring it to anyone who dared harm his child.

Techno must have felt how tense the atmosphere had gotten as he pulled away, practically sideways pressing against the door.

"Okay, take it easy. And why the hell are you getting so emotional about it?" He snorted, trying to pretend to be confident, but his hand tightened on the doorknob. Only this gesture forced Phil to close his eyes for a moment and take a deep, calming breath. And one more. And another one.

"Because it's important that you hear it and remember it," he replied, leaning his head against the headrest. He glanced at the boy, partially expecting him to look away, but the boy looked him straight in the eye.

"I don't care what they say," he muttered in a way that told Phil he meant 'I keep their words in my head and in my heart, etched forever'.

"Okay. That's good", he nodded regardless , restarting the engine and pulling down onto the road. "You shouldn't."

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by @SylviaoftheDepths and she, once again, did amazing job!

I am once again recommending you this fic (and yes, I'll keep doing this. lol).  
[archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The anger slowly flew out of him, gradually turning into frustration, leaving a bitter taste of disappointment behind. In people, the system, but also himself, because with every second that passed, he felt more and more clearly that he had made a mistake. He shouldn't allow himself to show his anger, not yet, not when he knew perfectly well that whatever the situation, Techno would expect to fall victim to it. It took a good eight months for Wilbur to stop being afraid every time someone around him seemed a little irritated. Eight months - not two meetings and half an hour of conversation.

He remembered one day in mid-June breaking several traffic rules by rushing headlong to the address his son had sobbed on his phone between "Phil, please come over, now, please" and "You'll be angry, but please come..." As it turned out, Wilbur and Schlatt somehow managed not only to hurl their ball into someone's garden, but also to come up with the brilliant idea of climbing up onto the fence to try and get it back, fall off that same fence, destroy two flowerbeds and break a glass pot. Phil understood that this might be a cause for anger. He understood that the owner of the supposedly damn valuable flowers and a collection of pots demanded compensation. But he definitely didn't understand yelling at two kids and making the whole situation a spectacle that half of the bored neighborhood turned to watching. Phil showed up just in time to see the woman grab the terrified Wilbur by the arm, and at the last moment stopped Schlatt from lunging at her throat. Not that he really didn't want to see it. He simply suspected that the escalation of violence would only worsen his child's condition.

"It was really, really weird," Wilbur muttered an hour later as Phil finally parked in their driveway. He had red eyes and puffy cheeks, but had calmed down a bit as he waited in the car for both sides to finish their testimony, as one of the onlookers decided the case was no longer funny and called the police. Phil didn't feel guilty. His throat was a little sore and his head was still buzzing with the screams, but he was also filled with deep satisfaction.

He switched off the engine but didn't move, staring at Wilbur in the rearview mirror.

"Did I scare you?"

The boy shook his head.

"No... Not really. I mean..." He focused on the loose thread on the sleeve of the T-shirt, which he wound around his finger to find something to do with his hands. "You were terrifying," he confessed, and Phil felt instantly guilty. "Really terrifying. But I wasn't scared at all because I knew you weren't mad at me. And then..." He hesitated, tilting his head a little lower. "When you came and I saw that you were angry and you started screaming, it... It was nice. And I felt safe." He finally broke the thread, twirled it in his fingers for a moment, then finally looked up at Phil with a doubtful look. "Does that make sense?"

It did. It definitely did, even if neither of them knew how to put it into words, they both just understood.

Techno didn't understand. Techno was far from understanding that Phil might get angry because of him but not at him. And it probably wasn't going to change too quickly.

He couldn't tell which of them felt more awkward. Techno turned his back to him as much as possible and, leaning his forehead against the glass, looked back at the road. He was visibly tense, and his knee was still twitching nervously. Phil made no further attempt to engage in conversation, accepting that he had taken his one chance and fucked it up spectacularly. He just sincerely hoped that at least Wilbur wouldn't make it worse.

No, wait. That sounded wrong. He knew his son and knew that he would never have done anything wrong on purpose, especially since only less than two hours ago, his main concern was whether he would be allowed to play with his 'new brother' (Phil didn't ask why he wouldn't. It wasn't a good moment to reach so deep). But he was still just a child in a difficult, stressful situation. Nobody would be surprised if at some point it just overtook him.

But, apparently, it would not happen just yet, because when Phil finally opened the door to the house, letting Techno pass in front of him and gesturing for him to the living room, somewhere upstairs a door immediately opened, a pair of feet pounded on the steps and Wilbur ran downstairs, stopping on the last step. He looked at the other boy, then at Phil as if asking for permission, and when the man reached out to him, he immediately ran to his side, gripping his hand tightly.

Techno didn't back away or flinch, but shifted the suitcase so that he had it centered in front of him, like a shield. His face was still glistening with sweat, and the last thing Phil wanted was him fainting and Phil needing to remember how first aid worked. On the other hand, he had a strong feeling that he shouldn't leave the boys alone right away, even if it would only be for half a minute and even if he would literally be a few meters away all the time. Not when Wilbur's eyes already rested on Techno's shoulders.

*Damn it.* He was going to ask something, he was going to ask about it, Phil could see it in his expression, in the way he frowned, damn, he forgot all about it, didn't think at all...!

"Wilbur-"

"Do you want some water?" The boy blurted out at the exact same moment, and Phil immediately fell silent in surprise. "You're sweaty."

Techno didn't reply, either in words or in any other way, but Wilbur didn't seem to be waiting for that at all. When he returned from the kitchen a moment later with a bottle of water, he didn't hand it directly to him either, but put it back on the couch and immediately stepped back, returning to the previous place. Phil felt his hand and squeezed it quite reflexively.

It wasn't that he didn't know Wilbur was smart. He was well aware of this and tried to remind him of it at every step. He just sometimes forgot that Wilbur understood better than anyone what it was like to be a child in a new, scary environment, among people who could hurt you at any moment if they wanted to. How it was to believe that they would hurt you, maybe sooner, maybe later, but someday for sure. It was easy to forget. It was easy to pretend that those first few weeks had never happened, that he had been here forever, that he had never stood in the same place as Techno now, and looked at Phil with the same fear and sad anticipation.

But Wilbur remembered. He remembered not to ask questions, he remembered to keep his distance, he remembered that it was up to Techno to decide when and if he wanted to let them come closer.

Wilbur remembered, and Phil felt horrible about how grateful he was about it.

Techno emptied the bottle in a few mighty gulps, but only after he made sure that it was sealed beforehand. Ah. Great. Getting better. Phil loved these little, inconspicuous habits.

"So..." Wilbur shifted nervously from foot to foot, and for a few seconds he looked as if he had already made a detailed escape plan in his mind. But then he took a deep breath, grinned broadly, and held out his hand in greeting - and Phil realized that he wasn't scared at all. He was nervous because he wanted to make a good first impression.

"Hi." When no one squeezed his hand, he raised it to his forehead as if saluting. "Um... I'm Wilbur."

Techno grimaced and eyed him warily. Wilbur kept smiling, but Phil could have sworn he straightened up and surreptitiously tried to stand on tiptoe.

"Yeah. I heard."

If Wilbur felt offended by the cold reception, he didn't show it. Instead, he ran three great strides through the living room, jump on the couch, and reached for something on the table.

"Do you like playing cards?" He leaned over the back, lifting the deck of cards in a gesture of victory. He waited a moment, and when he got no reply, waved the box encouragingly. "You wanna play with me? Phil taught me to play Macao. I can show you, I'm really good at it. Dream says I'm cheating, but don't listen to him, he has no evidence and he's just angry because he keeps losing. Dream has a problem with everything. He took offense recently because we played Monopoly and he was in jail three times in a row. What was I supposed to do about it? We can play Monopoly too. But later. People usually shout at each other a lot during the game." He paused for a moment just as Phil was getting ready to remind him that he had to breathe too. Not that this joyful chatter bothered him in any way. He was always happy to see how open and daring his child gradually became. "So? Cards?"

Techno definitely didn't share his enthusiasm. Rather, he looked as if he was trying by sheer willpower to knock the cards out of his hand and throw them in his face. Phil shifted slightly to the left in case he got bored with telekinesis and tried more traditional methods.

"No."

Wilbur's smile faded.

"Oh. Okay." There was genuine disappointment in his voice, but he didn't try to push. "Maybe later...?"

Phil was pretty sure 'later' wouldn't come too soon, but he kept the thought to himself. Techno seemed as interested in making friends as he was in walking on nails.

He was, however, very interested in exploring the house, and it would have been a really good sign if Phil hadn't been absolutely sure that what he meant was potential hiding places and escape routes. Not that there was anything weird about it. He simply wished he hadn't seen the disappointment in his eyes at the news that, apart from the bathroom, none of the rooms had a lock, and that his room was upstairs, and that a jump from the windowsill could break his limbs.

Wilbur, trailing step by step, seemed completely unaware of this, and joyfully continued the process of talking his new brother to death.

"Here's the kitchen. You can take whatever you want, but when you finish the milk, don't put the empty carton in the fridge, because Phil won't be able to drink his coffee later in the morning and he'll end up whining about it. Oh, and we can share duties! You'll be setting the table and helping with the washing up. And once a week you have to vacuum everywhere."

Phil raised an eyebrow.

"Wilbur, did you just pass all your duties to him?"

The boy was silent, he stared at the man with an unreadable face for a few seconds, then, as if nothing had happened, trotted over to the door to the terrace.

"Come on, I'll show you the garden!"

For the first time a shadow of genuine curiosity flashed across Techno's face.

"Do you have a garden here?" He asked, and at first Phil assumed he was entertaining the idea of the easiest possible escape route. However, when they stepped out onto the sun-heated terrace, the child's eyes lit up clearly and the corners of his mouth lifted. And even if he immediately shook himself and became serious, it was too late. Phil made the appropriate observations, drew conclusions, and clung to them like a sinking raft on the high seas.

"Do you like it?" He asked, although he knew perfectly well that he was unlikely to receive an honest answer. And he was not mistaken. "We only have a few vegetable patches. I have absolutely no hand for plants."



Techno frowned. For a moment he looked as if he was seriously considering whether to say something, but before he could make up his mind, Wilbur, clearly bored of running aimlessly between the beds, knocked on the glass door.

"I'll show you your room!"

Phil tried very hard not to feel disappointed when he was once again only given a telltale silence.

"It's empty so you can decorate it up yourself," Wilbur explained as Techno stood a few minutes later on the threshold of a white painted and indeed almost empty room.

On the principle that you don't change the method that works, Phil chose a furniture set almost identical to the one his first child had received the year before. Yes, it was a bit of a sad sight. Yes, it got even sadder when Techno laid his disproportionately large suitcase on the bed and took out of it one carefully folded pant, two T-shirts, a sweatshirt, pajamas and a toothbrush, as if it were the icing on a pitifully thin empty cake. But, with any luck, that was about to change soon. Wilbur had started with one map above his desk, and but now Phil wasn't quite sure what color the walls were under the thick layer of photos and posters. He hasn't seen the floor very often either, but that was a phenomenon he would rather not repeat.

Still, as he glanced at the bleak mound of clothes on the new sheets, he felt familiar twitch in his heart.

"How about shopping tomorrow?" He tried his best to make it sound like a casual proposition, not a scream of despair. "I've prepared some clothes for you, and I think they'll actually fit, but I'd rather you pick your own clothes. Although I tried to make them... 'universal'."

Somewhere behind him, Wilbur made a sound as if he was choking.

"'Universal' means boring."

Sometimes Phil remembered the times when his son could keep his mouth shut and not make fun of him all the time. A dark period in history, indeed.

Techno slowly closed the suitcase and set it on the floor. He carefully ran his hand over the sheets as if he were making sure he wouldn't fall into any masked trap before he sat up in bed.

"So I can unpack here?" He made sure, glancing significantly at his very meager possessions.

Phil smiled, trying for cheerful.

"Of course."

There was complete silence for several long, unbearably stretched seconds.

"Will you leave, finally?"

"Ah! Yes, sure." Phil grabbed Wilbur by the arm, dragging him out into the hallway with him. Techno followed them at a safe distance, until he was able to reach the doorknob. "If you wanted to change, I left clothes in the wardrobe. There are fresh towels in the bathroom drawer, feel free to take a shower if you feel like it. I'll call you to dinner, okay?"

The boy shut the door in his face, not bothering to answer.

Wilbur swayed carelessly on his heels.

"I think we did well," he said with all the might of childish naivety. "He didn't try to run away. It's a good sign."

Phil would love to have at least half his optimism.

## Chapter End Notes

[archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290)

Here comes the link again, because I live in Poland and it's kinda our thing - putting the same billboards everywhere.

The same. Fucking. Billboards.

(Sorry, I just have a moment of hating my country.)

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

As always @SylviaoftheDepths did amazing job with this chapter!

Also, here's link. You know what I want.

[archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290)

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Maybe he should have had a little more self-confidence, because the second day of Techno's stay at their home started really promising. Maybe not sensational, but definitely closer to 'good' than 'tragic', and taking into account the circumstances, they couldn't count on more.

Surprise number one: when he came to wake the boy for breakfast in the morning, he not only opened the door a crack, but also allowed him to go inside. With obvious reluctance, and probably more out of the conviction that refusal would do nothing, but that was still a progress. Surprise number two: he was wearing one of the T-shirts Phil had left in the closet for him. Thank goodness, apparently no garment had accumulated many years of trauma for him.

"Can I wear a sweatshirt?" Was the first Techno said, and for a moment Phil didn't understand why that specifically was the first thing he'd chosen to say to him. But then his gaze fell on his bare, disfigured arms, and the memory of the previous day hit with full force. Although it could hit stronger. He deserved it. "I don't like people staring at them."

Phil hesitated, not sure from which side to approach the subject. On one hand, he felt obliged to at least try to instill in the child a minimal respect for his own body. On the other, his own scars seemed to burn beneath the long sleeve of his shirt whenever he got to it. Was he a hypocrite? In a way, for sure. But most of all, he was a father who wanted his children to grow up to be better, healthier people than himself.

"Techno, listen..."

The boy scowled at him without even waiting for him to get to the point.

"Are you gonna blabbing about how 'the scars mean I'm stronger'?" he mocked someone in a high, squeaky voice, "Or some shit like that?"

For some reason, Phil was absolutely sure that Nate was the author of that cliché. Very in his style - lots of good intentions and shitty effect.

He shook his head, crouching in front of the boy, who flinched but didn't back away, staring at him alertly, almost defiantly.

"I will 'blab' that you shouldn't care what anyone thinks about them. Scars are scars. They mean something bad happened, that's all. It's okay if you don't want to show them. I understand it perfectly, really, believe me. But you shouldn't be ashamed of them. It's not your fault you have them. You haven't done anything wrong."

He tried to make the last words sound particularly strong, and thought he succeeded to some extent, because although Techno immediately folded his arms over his chest, his hands covering the largest clusters of mutilated skin, his voice was much softer when he spoke again. Dripping with bitterness and full of sad reconciliation with fate, but much, much calmer.

"I think if you asked them, they would say something different."

Phil wasn't sure who exactly 'they' were. He knew, however, that he would very much like to exchange a few words with them. Preferably in a remote area where no one would hear the screams and never find the bodies.

"I don't think people who do something like this deserve to be able to express their opinion at all. Generally, they deserve nothing." He straightened, watching the boy's knuckles slowly regain color as he gradually loosened his grip on his shoulders. He wasn't under the illusion that he had managed to fix the problem once and for all (or at least for more than an hour), but he must have taken a bigger step in that direction than the last time, and that was something to be proud of. "You can wear whatever you want. But remember that no one in this house will ever tease you about them. And if someone else tries... just tell us. Okay?"

Surprise number three: after a few seconds of silence, he heard a soft "Okay".

Who knows, maybe he was the right man in the right place after all.

Maybe it all had a chance to work out.

\* \* \*

Surprise number four: Techno was cooperating.

Perhaps he was not particularly enthusiastic, perhaps he only spoke when someone asked him a question that required an answer more complex than "yes" or "no", perhaps he seemed lost in his own thoughts and completely cut off from reality - but he cooperated! He was pushing the still empty cart in front of him, studying the shop windows, and didn't even look like he was planning to run away.

"So you will buy me whatever I want?" He made sure when they passed the electric barriers of one of the clothing stores.

Phil hesitated. He didn't want to raise the question of price, remembering the care with which Wilbur always studied the tags of each item before showing it to him. On the other hand -

unfortunately, he was not a millionaire (he didn't understand why, but you see the world just wasn't fair).

"Unless it's worth more than both of my kidneys," he finally replied, hoping that the playful tone would soften the overall message a little.

It worked somehow, because when Techno nodded, he seemed more than satisfied. Phil really couldn't ask for anything more. A child who tells you what he needs? Who can specify what he wants and is not afraid to refuse if he finds any of the things proposed to him "nasty"? Who understands that he cannot live his entire life in one pair of pants? Thank you, God, and may there be more such miracles!

Although, to be honest, he didn't fully understand what criteria the boy was compiling his list of priorities by. Phil had never met a ten-year-old cautious enough to choose an autumn jacket, a raincoat and a few thick sweaters in the summer, not to mention asking the cashier if the shoes he was measuring were sure to be waterproof and would they still be if they're left in the rain for a few hours. On the other hand, there were a lot of things Phil didn't understand, and probably never would have understood - like most of the lucky people. So he tried not to pay special attention to it, just making sure that the cart also included a few thinner T-shirts, shorts and sneakers.

It got a little more difficult when all the clothes finally ended up in the bags and they set out to find accessories for the new room. Or at least Phil has set out. To find at least a little bit of interest that Techno has apparently lost somewhere between the hangers.

"I'll show you where the posters are!" Wilbur, making up for both of them, seemed utterly indifferent to the bored look the other boy gave him time and time again. "We can pick a bigger one so you can hang it over your desk. Like my map. Or we can make a photo collage like Eret has. His aren't even real photos, he got them from the internet. That's why they're pretty."

Techno rolled his eyes, but, clearly feeling that he wouldn't win this war, followed him down one of the alleys. Phil watched them go, turning his head quickly as the boy glanced over his shoulder at him. He wasn't quite sure what the relationship between the boys was at that moment. He wasn't even sure it could be called a "relationship" at all. Wilbur's enthusiasm neutralized Techno's irritation, and the overall result showed something on the level of mutual tolerance. There was a high probability, however, that the laws of mathematics weren't very relevant here.

"Have you thought about the color of the walls?" He asked when the kids returned with an armful of rolled-up posters of various sizes. He had a strong suspicion that most of them would mysteriously end up in the wrong room, but he decided not to interfere.

He turned the cart down the paint alley, stopping at the first bookcase. He quietly hoped that they would choose one of the lighter shades, and Techno must have sensed it, because he immediately headed in the opposite direction. For a moment his gaze wandered down the shelves, until he suddenly froze, like a predator at the sight of a prey, and a wide, decidedly malicious smile appeared on his lips.

"This one."

Phil followed the direction the boy was pointing his finger at and... No, he didn't really feel disappointed. Not even annoyed. He just wanted to sigh very, very heavily.

Wilbur was much less subtle.

"You can't paint the room black."

Techno was already on tiptoe to reach the upper shelf. He managed to slide the can down with his fingertips, and Phil at the last moment leaned over to grab it before it fell on his head. There was no point in expecting some "Oh, thank you, it almost killed me!" but he felt a bit hurt when the kid just jumped away from him as if he had electrocuted him.

"Because...?"

"Because it's gonna be dark, dumbass."

Despite his love for logical arguments, Phil rested his hand on his son's shoulder to placate him a bit.

"This is Techno's room, Wilbur. He can choose any color he wants." *Even if it's a nightmarish choice intended only to throw me off balance and start an argument, and with the eyes of my soul I can already see how terribly difficult it would be to repaint it when - God, please - Techno changes his mind and...* "Ah! How about those special paints you can write on with chalk? I'm sure I saw them here last time."

Wilbur sucked in a breath, suddenly keenly interested.

"Can you write on the walls?"

"You no longer have free walls to do anything with them. Techno? What do you think?"

Techno didn't answer. He didn't have to. The way he looked at Phil with anger and some strange, vague disappointment was more than enough. He turned on his heel, studied the paints for a moment, then grabbed the closest, a light brown shade.

"Okay," he grunted, tossing the can more than putting it back in the basket. "So be it."

Phil tried very hard to hide his relief and satisfaction. Very hard. Which doesn't mean he succeeded.

"I really don't mind if you..."

Techno pushed back the basket, which collided with the bookshelf and probably only miraculously didn't drop any cans from it.

"I said okay," he growled, heading towards the opposite end of the alley.

Phil was ready to run after him, but at that moment he felt a trembling hand tighten on his forearm. He looked down, and all his attention immediately shifted to Wilbur, gasping for air in shallow, quick breaths.

"Hey, hey, kiddo." He crouched down beside him, tossing his dark fringe aside to meet his eyes. "It's okay, nothing's happening."

The boy nodded slowly, and though his eyes were still wide and his fingers were gripping Phil's hand so tightly that it was almost painful, he sounded much calmer than he looked when he spoke up.

"I know. It's okay," he assured him, finally withdrawing his hand to immediately hug himself. "I just got scared. But it's okay."

Phil hummed in understanding.

"You want to go home? We can come here another time."

Wilbur shook his head.

"No, I wanted..." he hesitated, suddenly embarrassed. "I wanted to show him something."

He glanced at Phil as if he were judging if he could trust him with his secret, then moved closer so he could say something in his ear.

Phil immediately felt all his uneasiness and doubts turn to affection.

"Oh." He nodded as Wilbur stepped back, eyeing him questioningly. "Yhm, yeah, I think it's a good idea."

Techno didn't think it was a good idea.

"I'm not a baby," he grunted ten minutes later as Wilbur almost forcibly dragged him into the toy alley.

Phil watched him closely for more warning signs, but it seemed that the boy had calmed down a bit and had no plans for another outburst. In fact, he almost seemed ashamed. When they found him sitting on the floor, his back against the wall and his chin on his knees, there was no more aggression left in him, only confusion and fear. Phil didn't try to ask. He didn't try to talk. A crowded shop with a few people already peering at them with curiosity was definitely not a good place for serious talks. So he patiently waited for the boy to gather enough strength to stand up and follow them, keeping a safe distance, still tense and silent.

Well, now at least he started talking. Good sign!

"I have that one!" Wilbur jumped up to pull a large, plush sheep off the shelf, which he immediately dragged towards Techno. "It's called 'Friend'. He's suuuper soft and nice. Give it a try!"

Techno grimaced. He grimaced even more as the sheep's muzzle practically stabbed him in the cheek.

"Why the hell would I need that?"

Wilbur thought for a moment, stroking his blue fur.

"It's nice to have something to hug when you're sad. Or if you want to cry without anyone seeing."

Phil wasn't sure exactly what that description had aroused in him and how he should react to it, so temporarily decided not to react at all.

"You can choose whatever you want," he said instead, nodding at the rows of stuffed animals.

Perhaps he was exaggerating a bit. It's possible that boys that age didn't want to appear 'childish' anymore. It is possible that Techno had a completely different taste when it came to toys. The thing was, deep down in his heart, though he had a hard time admitting it, Phil believed Wilbur was right. He could try and try to give his boys all the love, tenderness, and attention they so needed and were thirsty for after years of neglect, but sometimes it still wasn't enough. Sometimes he didn't know in time that he was needed. Sometimes, by chance, he did or said the wrong thing and stepped over some thin, invisible line of trust. Sometimes, for a moment, for a day, sometimes for two, he became a stranger again. And however infinitely more he would have liked his children to always come to him when they needed reassurance, if the stuffed toy was to help when he couldn't - he was ready to buy the whole goddamn store right away.

Techno crossed his arms over his chest, pushing away the sheep that Wilbur continued to stab at his shoulder with a mischievous smile.

"Okay," he grunted, clearly trying to sound rude enough to make Phil change his mind on the spot and decide not to buy him anything. When nothing of the sort happened, he let out a low murmur of extreme annoyance, reluctantly lifting his head to study the toys.

It took a few seconds of searching for his eyes to shine and his face to soften for a second. Phil followed his gaze and immediately shifted so that the child could reach the appropriate shelf.

The fluffy white bear looked strangely out of place in the boy's embrace, Techno holding him with outstretched arms as if he didn't quite know what to do with him. Because maybe he didn't know. Phil preferred not to think too much about that, for his own peace of mind.

Nevertheless, precisely because he looked so incredibly awkward as he stared at the toy, looking in that moment uncharacteristically both helpless and defenseless, the bear was definitely going to go home with them.

"He's... really soft," the boy admitted quietly, and though he tensed again, as if remembering to be alert, the way his hands trembled slightly, clenched against the white fur, completely defied his indifferent expression. "And pretty nice, or something... Let it be."



"Let it be" meant that Techno didn't let go of the stuffed animal for a second, until he had to put it on the counter, and even then he held it by the paw all the time to make sure that no one would take it from him.

"You want to check my pockets?" He asked as they pushed the cart towards the exit. Wilbur apparently made it his goal to ram into as many people as possible along the way.

Phil hesitated, trying to remember if the file mentioned anything about kleptomania or something like that, but was absolutely sure he would have immediately recalled such an important detail.

"Is there anything in them I should know?" He made sure, and when the boy shook his head, he shrugged. "Then I see no reason."

He couldn't tell if that was a right or wrong answer. Techno's face remained unreadable and his eyes indifferent, but Phil still gave himself a small mental pat on the back. For encouragement.

Or maybe even that tiny mental reward was a little exaggerated, because as soon as they got home, Techno immediately grabbed the bags with his things and rushed upstairs. Phil just managed to call out for him to be careful before the door slammed behind him.

Well, at least Wilbur was still stewing with enthusiasm.

"Can I go get him?" He asked later as Phil laid out the scrambled eggs on the plates. His help to prepare the dinner was usually limited to half-lying on the table and having deep conversations more with himself than with anyone else.

"Sure."

"Can I talk to him?"

Phil set the pan on the stove for a few seconds to think.

"Of course. If he only wants to," he replied carefully, then added, "don't try to force him, okay?"

He knew that he worried unnecessarily, the boy had already proved that not only did he know what to do, he was definitely better at handling the situation than Phil was, but still... He didn't want him to be disappointed. And it was inevitable, so much so that by the time Wilbur had run up the stairs, Phil was already removing a tray from the cupboard to place a plate of food, a cup of tea, and a bottle of water on it.

Less than a minute later he heard fast footsteps on the stairs a second time. Definitely one pair of feet.

"I'm not hungry, fuck off," the boy said, likely repeating what had been said to him far too enthusiastically for someone who had just been dismissed aggressively. "I'll leave it at the door for him, okay?"

Without waiting for a reply, he picked up the tray and, this time much more carefully so as not to spill anything, made his way again to the stairs.

Phil didn't ask. The last few months had taught him that sometimes he just couldn't understand his kid and he shouldn't even try.

Wilbur didn't come back for a long time, however, and anxiety was gradually taking over Phil's common sense. The scrambled eggs began to cool, and the steam stopped rising from his mug, but he couldn't bring himself to eat alone. Maybe it was because he wasn't used to lonely meals anymore. Perhaps it was because he was vigilant about making sure that his son always ate enough often enough. Or maybe because he didn't have any attention left, because he was fully focused on anticipating any suspicious sound. Some screaming, or broken glass, or a dead body hitting the floor...

Okay, maybe he was being dramatic. Maybe. A bit. But he was damn hungry and absolutely unable to swallow anything, so although he kept telling himself over and over that it was pointless and he was just making a fool of himself, he went upstairs to get rid of the vision of washing blood off the floor once and for all. He would just look into Wilbur's room, find him too busy checking out something super-important on his phone, or the atlas, or...

Wilbur wasn't in his room. Unless he doubled because Phil could clearly hear his voice coming from behind the closed door of Techno's room.

To be clear, Phil found eavesdropping a very nasty habit and a serious breach of privacy. Especially when it came to his own children, who had absolutely every right to feel at ease in their own home and not have to worry that someone would trick them into discovering their secrets. If something wasn't for his ears, Phil wouldn't hear it.

But on the other hand...

Okay, there was no "other hand". He was just a bad person and he absolutely couldn't contain his curiosity. If he believed in Hell, he would say he would probably end up in it for what he was about to do.

As silently as he could, mentally cursing himself, he moved closer to the door to hear better.

"You don't have to be scared, you know." Wilbur's voice was low, calm, and very, very far from the vision of bloodshed. "Phil won't hurt you."

Techno sounded exactly as enthusiastic as ever. Perhaps even less so. He was slowly reaching the stage where a person turns into an emotional black hole, sucking optimism from all around them.

"How do you know?"

A short huff.

"I live with him, dumbass."

"But I'm not his son."

"And?" He didn't have to see Wilbur to know he'd just shrugged. "Me neither. I mean, not like *a real son*. He took me from the system a year ago."

Techno was silent for a long time.

"Oh..."

Yes, indeed - oh.

When Phil imagined future punishment for eavesdropping, he really was thinking of Hellfire rather than an immediate stab in the heart with a knife.

He couldn't even argue that he was innocent because he fucking consciously brought it on himself. He wasn't supposed to be hearing this, he shouldn't have heard it, he was damn absolutely sure Wilbur would never say anything like this if he knew Phil could hear.

For some reason, this knowledge made the situation five times worse.

Deep down, deep, deep beneath layers of shock, pain, and disappointment, frustration grew. He was tired, embittered and somehow betrayed, even if he couldn't explain how and by whom exactly.

Was it by a child, because he had the audacity to be guided by his own emotions? Because he didn't appreciate his efforts and didn't feel exactly what he "should" feel?

Phil never thought it could be that pathetic...

He didn't think that way. He really didn't. Wilbur owed him nothing, had no debt to pay, neither material nor emotional, and Phil knew that perfectly well. He was just hurt and needed time to think things through and work through his own emotions. And to put his heart together, if it had to be this damn dramatic.

They never really talked about it - at one point he just found himself calling the boy 'son' not only in his mind but aloud as well. The first time it happened, Wilbur looked at him in genuine amazement, then grinned broadly and nodded, as if to say, "Yes. Exactly. This is how it has to be." Phil had been sure it would be enough. That they had made some kind of silent agreement that day and unanimously decided that they were a family, maybe a little small, maybe a bit 'unofficial' - but absolutely *real* and perfectly sufficient.

Apparently he was wrong. Apparently Wilbur didn't think he was a *real* son in Phil's eyes.

Did he do something wrong at any point? Had he let him down or disappointed him, or did he just not make it clear enough how much the boy meant to him? Maybe he should be more open. He wasn't one to talk about feelings even if someone held a gun to his head, but he was ready to try, learn it somehow, whatever...

(A soft voice in the back of his head whispered that perhaps Wilbur didn't see *him* as his real father. He didn't want to listen to it. He really, really didn't...)

He vaguely heard Wilbur talking, but it was only Techno's voice that brought him back to reality.

"He called you his son," he said, and Phil immediately felt a sudden rush of affection. At least one child noticed his intentions. It was a pity that it was the one he had known only a few days... "Earlier, when he was talking to me."

"Yes, he does it a lot." Wilbur didn't seem surprised by this information, and there was no indication that he saw any discrepancy in the facts. "He's really weird sometimes. But that's nice. You'll get used to it."

A soft rustling sound, as if Techno was wrapped in the quilt more tightly.

"I'm not staying here."

"Why?" Phil couldn't hear the answer. Though a much more likely alternative was that it just never appeared. "Okay. You don't have to, if you don't want to. But if you change your mind... It would be nice if you stayed. Phil would be pleased."

"Phil doesn't care."

"That's not true! You say this because no one has cared for you before and you think it's normal, but it's not true. Puffy says so and Puffy is smart."

"Who's Puffy?"

"My therapist."

"Are you crazy or some shit?"

"I'm not! And you're not nice at all!"

"And?"

"And you could start."

"I don't have to be nice to you."

"But you can."

"But I won't."

"Fine!"

There was complete silence in the room for the next few seconds, and Phil was getting ready to leave the door before he was caught red-handed. Before he could even take a step towards his office, however, Wilbur spoke again, this time softer - much, much softer a mixture of compassion and understanding in his tone.

"You're scared."

Techno sucked in a loud breath.

"Not at all."

"You are. I know because I was scared, too."

"Do you want something?" Techno cut him off in a sharp, almost aggressive tone. "If not, get out. Now!"

Wilbur might have been so stubborn that it was masochistic at times, but even he knew when to let go, for his own safety. Phil heard him jump off the bed and immediately retreated down the hall. He had managed to close the office door behind him just as the one to the Techno room opened with a soft creak.

He fell heavily in a chair, rubbing his face with his hands.

*Not like a real son.*

He shouldn't have found out how Wilbur felt like this. He should never have heard it.

But he did hear. And he now had to learn to live with it somehow.

## Chapter End Notes

Here we are, at the beginning of Phil's Mental Breakdown Arc and I'm not joking, lmao. He will suffer, and I'll have a great time writing it down. Enjoy!

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

@SylviaoftheDepths helped me a lot with this chapter, so big "Thank you!" for her!

Phil didn't have much time to feel sorry for himself. With two children at home, he barely had time for anything, and he usually ended up staying up late to get his work done. Not that he was complaining. He knew in advance what he was signing up for, and he didn't regret any time spent with his boys. But he also wouldn't be angry either if the Higher Force would add two or three hours of sleep to his day...

On the other hand, would that really help if he'd been lying in bed for hours most nights, staring at the ceiling, contemplating his new failures at life?

"I'm just tired," he repeated when Wilbur asked for the third time if he was feeling well, after trying to sprinkle sugar on the eggs. He ruffled the boy's hair to reassure him a bit and reached into the cupboard with his other hand, but found an empty shelf. He frowned. "Are we out of cereal?"

Wilbur, turning the knobs of the toaster because, apparently, there was nothing more nutritious than bread-shaped charcoal, thought for a moment.

"I think Techno took them."

"All of them?" Not that he planned to hold the child accountable for food, but four boxes at once? "He won't eat dinner now."

"I don't think he ate them. He just wants to have them. You know... just in case."

"In case of what? Famine?"

Wilbur continued to concentrate on selecting the perfect degree of ashen for his breakfast. This time, however, he was clearly using it as an excuse not to have to meet his eyes.

"Yeah, something like that," he muttered evasively, and Phil, traditionally an absolute idiot, didn't understand at first. It was only after a few seconds and a few spins of mental gears that he finally managed to connect the dots and *oh...*

"Oh."

Damn it. All he had to do was think about it. He *should* have thought about it, after all the times he had to convince Wilbur that he could really eat what he wanted, when he wanted,

and he didn't have to wait for permission each time. What was wrong with people? Why did everyone suddenly insist on treating the food as the ultimate training prop?

"Should I talk to him about it?" He asked because, apparently, his greatest parenting authority was now a ten-year-old.

"You can. But it probably won't tell you anything." A damn helpful ten-year-old. "He's afraid of you."

Oh yeah. Great. This was exactly what he needed to hear now.

"I noticed, but thanks for reminding me. Is there anything I can do to make him feel better?"

"Give him time. He'll get used to it."

It was good advice, objectively. Probably the best possible in their situation. But damn hard to put into practice. Phil hated to wait passively, especially when it came to any of his children - he felt useless at the time and couldn't shake the feeling that he had failed as a father.

*(You're not a real father anyway,* whispered a voice from somewhere in the back of his head.

Phil had the real desire to hit his head down on the table just to silence it.)

He closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He was just tired. Very, very tired. Nothing more.

When he looked back at Wilbur, he was pouring half the jam jar over the black remnants of the bread. Somehow, it was this sight that made his heart feel a little lighter.

"You're really damn smart, you know?" He asked, most certainly *not* referring to his culinary skills.

The boy grinned broadly.

"I know," he assured, took another look at his handiwork and, clearly pleased with the result, handed the plate to Phil. "Here. For you."

The toast, turned effectively into charcoal, sank sadly beneath a thick layer of jam. Phil could feel his blood sugar jump by just looking at it.

"Oh, thank you."

There was still potential for it to be a good day though.

\* \* \*

It was indeed a good day. Damn surprising.

Techno didn't come down to breakfast, to the surprise of absolutely no one, but Phil somehow, climbing to the heights of creativity and balancing on the verge of manipulation, managed to convince him to go out to the garden with them in the afternoon. He wanted to give the child as much time as he needed, but barricading himself in a room for almost four days was definitely not healthy. Especially for a child with a shortage of sun, fresh air and interpersonal contact.

Two of the three points were finally achieved, which was far better than Phil was expecting. Techno emerged from his cave, wincing and squinting in the sun like the little vampire he was clearly trying to become. And although he wore a T-shirt with the longest sleeves he could find and settled almost immediately in the very corner of the garden, in the shade under a tree, it still counted as communing with nature in its pure form.

Phil tried to make conversation every now and then, or at least glance in his direction to see if he was okay. Each time, in exchange for a smile, he got a truly murderous look, or, on better occasions, a short, one-syllable answer. He didn't require anything else. Not yet anyway, unlike Wilbur, who had already entered full "I'll befriend you or I die trying" mode and could not be convinced to retreat anywhere off course, even though Techno was ignoring him, would move away from him when approached and at times almost literally snarl at him. Phil watched their interactions with a mixture of unease and admiration because hell, he had never met two such stubborn kids, and it could only turn out very good, or very bad - nothing in between. He tried not to intervene, concentrating on weeding the beds, but out of the corner of his eye he watched as his son gradually taken his teasing to the next level.

Techno ignored him as he sat down next to him, but visibly bristled as Wilbur moved even closer, so that their knees almost touched. A series of stabs to the shoulder with a bitten carrot seemed to tip the scales of bitterness.

"Stop it," he growled, immediately getting stabbed by the vegetable again. "I'll hit you," he threatened, and Phil immediately perked up his ears, triggering alert mode. It was fine to play, but none of the boys had to get hurt while play-fighting. "I mean it."

Wilbur just grinned.

"You won't," he said carelessly, biting off a piece of carrot. "You like me too much."

Techno was so genuinely surprised that he forgot his scowl for a good two seconds. He quickly fixed this mistake, but the line was already broken and the impression was not the same.

"I don't like you."

"You do." He twisted the core in his fingers, waving the green leaves happily. "Everyone likes me because I'm pretty."



"Pretty fucking annoying is what you are."

Wilbur laughed out loud.

"That's part of my charm."

And then, quite suddenly, he once again slapped Techno on the shoulder with a carrot and laughed even louder as the boy lunged at him in retaliation. They both jumped to their feet, one amused, as if he was just having the best time of his life, the other looked as if he was going to end said life. Phil put down the spatula and watched for a moment as they chased each other around the garden, knocking over the wheelbarrow, catching their trousers on the bushes, and jumping over the flower beds. It was with the latter that Wilbur lost his balance and landed on the ground, and since mother nature is ruthless, a knocked out victim is a practical win for the predator. He only had time to roll over onto his back before Techno caught him, pressing him even harder into the grass.

Phil shifted uneasily, not quite sure if the harmless squabbling had accidentally turned into something more serious, but Wilbur continued to laugh out loud and didn't seem to consider that option at all.

Techno watched him closely, confused by his level of self-destructiveness.

"Nobody ever really beat you up, huh?"

Wilbur howled even louder.

"I'm from the system too, you moron! Once they didn't beat me up on Christmas Eve and I thought it was the best gift possible!"

Phil grimaced involuntarily. He thought he got used to the fact that the boy would throw jokes like that sometimes, but he still felt uncomfortable with them each time. How was he supposed to react to that? Laugh? Apologize for something he wasn't there for? Keep silent about it?

Techno seemed to have a similar dilemma, staring at Wilbur for a long moment with a mixture of shock and disbelief before pulling away, finally letting him sit down.

"I forgot..." he muttered, suddenly much calmer, almost ashamed. "Sorry."

Wilbur just shrugged, still grinning.

"It happens."

Deep down, Phil breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't quite sure why or how, but it seemed that the boys were slowly beginning to accept each other. Okay, he'd rather the whole process be a little less trauma-sharing in the way most people share their passion for embroidery or love of B-horror movies, but in the end it was the result that mattered, wasn't it?

At least that's what he hoped, as he watched Wilbur help Techno up from the ground and immediately dragged him to the far edge of the garden, recounting how Sapnap had set fire to

hedge on his last visit. Phil hadn't heard of this particular story before and preferred to keep it that way. For his own peace of mind.

\* \* \*

The good day slowly turned into an equally nice, lazy evening. They ate dinner on the sun-heated terrace, Wilbur ceasing his incessant chatter only to swallow, and Techno, pretending to be utterly disinterested, yet looking at him expectantly every time the silence lasted more than a few seconds. Phil made no attempt to meddle with... whatever the relationship that was emerging before his eyes was. He would have given a lot to be a part of it, but he had a reasonable suspicion that it would be too soon.

Especially given that a few hours later, he fucked up spectacularly again.

"Time to go," he decided as the sky slowly turned red. Holidays were rare, nature changed routinely, but he still tried to make sure that the children had a relatively constant bedtime. Not that he always succeeded, but at least he tried. "Hey, kids. We're going home now."

To no one's surprise, neither of the boys did anything to show that they heard him at all. Phil waited a few more seconds from the open door before trying again.

"If you don't hurry, I'll go alone and leave you here," he threatened, stepping back inside and pretending that he was actually planning to close the door.

Wilbur, hearing the same thing an average of three times a week, just looked at him over his shoulder, clearly preparing for a long complaint about the fact that it was still light, warm, and that Schlatt could go to bed any time he wanted and nobody told him what to do. He didn't even have time to open his mouth, as Techno jumped up abruptly, nearly knocking him over in a frantic sprint towards the door. His breathing was quick and shallow when he burst into the house, his face pale, and the way he looked at Phil, as if he were afraid that any moment he would grab him by the collar and push him back outside, made the man sick.

*Shit.*

"Hey, Techno, calm down. I didn't mean to scare you. I would never do that."

He tried to stay calm and sound as persuasive as possible, and he must have succeeded to some extent, because the boy's shoulders relaxed a bit and the fear in his eyes slowly gave way to irritation.

"Never mind," he grunted, wrapping his arms around himself and looking away. He was clearly ashamed of allowing himself to be so obviously weak for a moment. Phil could

imagine how afraid he was that, any moment, his weakness would be used against him to punish or control him.

So much for a "good day"...

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have joked like that," he tried to save what he still could, but Techno just tensed up even more.

"I don't care," he growled, his fingers gripping his shoulders so tightly it must have hurt. "Here. I was out today. Happy? Will you leave me alone now?"

If Phil were to answer honestly, he would say "No". There was no option for him to give up and quit, not when he was absolutely sure he had a chance it could work. That beneath the façade of anger and aggression there was a very sensitive, damn hurt child, patient and understanding enough to listen to the whole plan to destroy the anteaters and not once tell Wilbur to shut up.

But that wouldn't be the answer Techno would want to hear. He probably didn't want to hear any answer, because before Phil could think of one he turned on his heel and ran out of the room, a door slamming somewhere upstairs a few seconds later.

"Don't worry." Wilbur patted his forearm with a comforting, slightly patronizing smile. "He'll get over it."

Sometimes Phil wondered which one of them really needed more support.

He didn't like the answer he gave himself.

He sent his son to the bath, not even dreaming that he would actually go to bed politely afterwards, and tried to focus on anything else to distract his attention from today's defeat. Everything was going well, how had he managed to ruin it with one stupid joke? He should have been more careful with what he was saying, but did he really have to assume that at every turn, even the most normal thing could have been and probably *was* used to harm the child? How could he not go crazy with everything he was forced to imagine? How was he to keep the remnants of faith in humanity and not go out into the streets with a gun?

Half an hour later, when he had finally run out of dishes to wash, burnt pans to scrape off, and trash to sort, he still didn't know the answer. And he didn't have the strength to look for it any longer, not when he knew that he still had to put two boys in bed, an assignment to be completed and a dozen e-mails requiring answers.

However, he could barely climb the stairs, and though he eventually managed, he immediately froze, staring at the scene in the corridor.

Wilbur sat cross-legged on the floor, his back against Techno's door, inseparable sheep on his lap.

"I told Schlatt about you and he agreed pink hair is great," he reported, having no problem with the fact that he couldn't be sure if anyone was listening to him at all. "I mean, I would

look stupid, but when you make that scary face of yours, it looks really cool. But Dream insists you can't really be named 'Techno.' His real name is Clay, but no one calls him that. He's just jealous because you got a cool name right away, and he had to make it up for himself. Don't talk to him too much. He's fine, but sometimes when he says something, I just want to hit him. But he'd probably hit me back, and he's stronger. You think you could hit him for me?"

There was a deafening silence.

"Oh. Okay. Y'know what, you would like Dream. You're just as stubborn." He snorted, although it was obvious that he wasn't really offended. He stroked the sheep's blue fur for a moment before asking, "Have you named your bear somehow?"

Another silence. And then, quite unexpectedly, a soft voice from outside the door.

"Steve..."

Wilbur instantly beamed.

"It's a nice name," he admitted, and Phil couldn't help remembering that Christmas morning, when the two of them were sitting in their pajamas, among the colorful gift papers. And he couldn't help remembering the whole long, tiring journey it took to have Wilbur by his side, happy and calm, and believing that whatever happened, Phil would always protect him.

He did it once and he'll do it twice - even if it was going to be harder, and he still hadn't learned from his mistakes.

Wilbur looked up at the sound of footsteps. He looked at him questioningly, but Phil just smiled and leaned in to kiss the top of his head before making his way into the office. It had been a long time since he was so proud of his child. And he was proud surprisingly often.

*(He's not really 'yours',* a soft voice whispered in his head. Phil told it to shut up.

It didn't shut up.)

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

Aaand my sister's work is done now, sooo... You know.  
[archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29733213/chapters/73129290)

Phil wasn't quite sure what he thought about all this "bonding through trauma". On the one hand, if something is weird but it works - it's not weird at all. On the other hand, he would definitely prefer the boys to find any common themes that don't in any way touch upon a long list of neglect and violence. Was he happy to see his children talking to each other? Of course. Did it made him feel terribly awkward most of the time? Fuck yes.

Like when Wilbur woke up in really bad mood and spent a good five minutes at breakfast staring blankly at his plate. Phil really didn't want to reprimand him, not with Techno siting next to and looking at him curiously, but eventually he leaned over the table to touch the boy's hand.

"Wilbur." He tried to sound as gentle as possible, but Wilbur flinched anyway and withdrew his hand. He was clearly elsewhere with his thoughts , and right then he blinked, looked at Phil, and quickly squeezed his still lying on the table hand, in a silent "It's okay now. It wasn't about you". But this time it wasn't as good as usual.

( *You aren't his real father* , the voice whispered. *If you were, he would not be afraid of you.*

Phil couldn't answer to that.)

"If you wait like this, for God know what," Techno interjected, watching the whole scene with growing impatience "someone will take it from you."

Wilbur didn't even glance in his direction as he finally turned his hard-boiled eggs into scrambled eggs.

"Who? You? And what for?"

Techno pursed his lips, clearly refraining from making any comment. Phil wasn't sure if this was a change for the better or not.

"You're not always lucky to have enough food to eat," he finally muttered, jabbing the egg with far more force than was necessary.

Wilbur shrugged.

"You're not always allowed to eat, even if there is enough food."

Sitting at the table as if nothing had happened, in front of a plate that he had never had the slightest trouble filling and emptying, Phil felt bloody out of place. As if he should apologize for being lucky enough to avoid such problems in his life.

"You can eat as much as you want and when you want, Techno," he assured, pushing aside the discomfort. He could take care of his own problems later, now he had more important things on his mind. "I promise no one will ever forbid you this."

If Puffy is to be believed, bringing up the subject of trauma was a good sign. Painful, heartbreaking for both sides, but very important stage, if not the most important. You can't help if you don't know where the problem lies. You cannot fully support if you cannot predict when and how you will be needed. So if your child starts talking, shut up, listen, and take notes.

Phil theoretically knew all of this long before he adopted Wilbur. It sounded trivial, even of course. Listen and react. Nothing easier. It wasn't until much later that he realized that it wasn't going to be that pretty in practice. Because sometimes he just didn't know how to react. Sometimes what his instincts were telling him wasn't the right answer at all. Sometimes he just wanted to hug the boy and hold him in his arms until he finally believed that he was safe, that he was no longer in danger, and that he could eventually be a child again. But reality didn't work that way, and love was not a cure for all the harm that had been done, and it was not simply possible to form a patch of warm, kind words against all the evil in the world.

Phil liked to think of it as leaving a lamp on at night. It certainly helped to believe that there were no monsters around, but it was in no way a guarantee that no one would ever have a nightmare again. They could talk about food many times, it could have been serious and more or less painful for both of them, and it certainly helped to some extent. But the most part of the work continued to do regular hot meals and stabilization. He could say over and over that he would never, ever raise a hand against him, and yes, he should definitely talk about it. But it wasn't until the old bruises had faded and gone, and no new ones had replaced them, that Wilbur began to consider to believe him.

So he wasn't even a bit surprised when Techno didn't answer or even look in his direction. It was far too early to even dream of gaining his trust.

Even so, Phil wasn't going to give up, and that same evening he lugged four bloody heavy shopping bags into the house.

"Did you buy me something?" Wilbur, of course, showed interest only when all things magically and spontaneously transported themselves from the car to the kitchen table.

"Dinner."

"But something cool?"

He rolled his eyes.

"I will remind you this when you come to whine that 'we have nothing to eat'."

Wilbur just mumbled something about a salad that wasn't real food, but was much more engrossed in digging through the bags.

"What's this?" He asked when he reached the last, largest pack. Phil came to his aid by unwrapping a large cardboard box from the plastic.

"Fridge. Just a little one," he explained, and when the boy looked at him questioningly, he added, "I thought maybe Techno would feel a little more confident if he could actually keep food in the room."

It was absurd how he anxiously waited for his son's reaction. One would think he was an adult and in control of the situation, but no, apparently all his confidence depended on the approval of a ten-year-old. On the other hand, if anyone understood what he was going through and what Techno needed right now, it was only Wilbur. So why not put your pride in your pocket and trust him on this point? Especially since he clearly liked the idea, judging by his face and the way he inhaled dramatically.

"Good!" He praised, smiling broadly. And, of course, he couldn't help but screw it up right away, adding, "Did you really make it up yourself?"

Phil rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"You're really lucky you're so cute, you know?"

\* \* \*

Techno reacted exactly as it was easy to predict: he was distrustful, suspicious and looked for deception in everything. He didn't let anyone into his room, so Phil gave him instructions on how to plug the fridge blindly and through the door, praying that electric fuse survive. He didn't even allow the electric shock to enter his consciousness. Fortunately, the operation was a success, the patient survived and everyone could go back to their normal activities in peace: Wilbur to produce Hamlet-length messages that Schlatt probably wouldn't even read, Techno to slowly transform into Lord of Darkness, and Phil to long, a damn long list of overdue projects. He had no idea how his work was constantly increasing. Maybe it had something to do with his being unable to concentrate on anything for more than two minutes in the last few days? Or was it rather that he himself masochistically volunteered for additional assignments to "have something to keep thoughts busy"? The mystery was probably never meant to be solved...

It was almost seven pm, his eyes stung as if he had drenched them in acid, and he was sure that if he got another email with new guidelines that completely contradicted the previous ones he would write back "Lol, no." Actually, why wouldn't he?

Ah, yeah. He needed this job. He needed money. He needed to have food to feed the children, including the one who had just stuck his head through the ajar door.

"Phil?" Wilbur finally stopped drilling a hole in his back and stepped closer, leaning on the desk with his arms stretched, his feet barely touching the floor. Phil was absolutely sure that he would one day out of habit do this to the school bench, knock it over and get a concussion, but he didn't have the strength to preach to him. "Want to watch a movie with me?"

He wanted to laugh. Or cry. He wasn't sure which would actually come out first. He loved his kids, he really did, and he loved spending time with them, but he was terribly tired, his head was starting to ache and the last thing he thought about was hearing Elsa telling everyone to piss off for the millionth time.

"Maybe tomorrow, okay?" He suggested, although frankly speaking, the coming day didn't seem much better to him. "I have a few things to finish."

As expected, Wilbur didn't let go. What Phil hadn't expected was the stern expression he made and a serious, almost harsh tone.

"You're tired." It wasn't even a question, he just stated a fact and it was hard to disagree.

"Just a little."

" *Very* ."

Phil blinked. He couldn't remember the last time anyone spoke to him like this. Which isn't surprising, since he was probably about eight at the time.

"Very," he admitted, breaking himself under pressure he never expected to feel on himself. At what exact moment did his child turn into a parent?

( *He's a better father than you will ever be* , a voice whispered. *Well done, excellent job.*

Phil didn't have the strength to argue, so he screamed in his head to at least drown him out.)

Wilbur, meanwhile, was clearly enjoying his new role.

"You always say that you shouldn't work too much, because you can get sick" he reminded, which would be nice if he remembered all the rules just as well and adjusted to them himself.

Still, Phil smiled as ruffled his hair.

"That was about you. I am an adult."

"You're old," Wilbur heard in reply. "And I'll worry if you get sick. Old people can die from it."

He knew full well it was just a joke, but to tell the truth, at the moment he felt it was a very likely option. He glanced over his shoulder at the computer screen, then at his kid, back at the



open program, and back at the boy. If he was going to die, of the two wrongs he preferred to do it to the beat of "Let it go".

He sighed heavily.

"Ask Techno if he wants to watch something with us."

Wilbur beamed in an instant, abandoning his condescending tone and reverting back to his favorite incarnation - the malicious little gremlin.

"He didn't want to, but I've already talked him into it."

If Phil hadn't been sure he had just enough energy to go down the stairs and reach the couch, he probably would have laughed.

"You planned it, huh?"

"Yup. You trained me well."

Indeed. All too well.

When they got downstairs, Techno was already sitting in the very corner of the couch, cushions on all sides, as if he wanted to be absolutely sure that no one could even breathe in his direction. He was already wearing pajamas, and his damp hair was falling down his back in thick tangles. Phil realized long ago that most likely no one had ever taught him how to properly take care of them. Sometimes he was eager to offer help, but he was always held back by the realization that it wouldn't have met with a positive response. More likely with an attempted murder.

*Little steps, little steps...*

"Nice to see you again, kiddo." He smiled as he sat down in the opposite corner of the couch. "You left the room. Good."

Did he sound malicious? He didn't want to sound malicious. Okay, maybe he wanted a little, but not really. Not to hurt his feelings, he was just trying to tease him a little.

Techno didn't like being teased by anyone, judging by the look he was giving him.

"We're watching Finding Nemo!" Wilbur finally finished messing up the record shelf and lifted the proper packaging in a gesture of triumph.

Phil closed his eyes. Apparently, if a man wanted something very, very, very much, the universe would sooner or later actually give it to him. He was willing to use his wish to annihilate any memory of this particular film.

"Again?"

Wilbur glanced over his shoulder.

"You know what I want," he said indifferently.

Phil decided at the earliest opportunity to fill the entire freezer with fishsticks just to get back.

Get back at a ten-year-old. God, he needed sleep. And friends his age. And any life outside of home and work...

Ultimately, the movie turned out to be quite passable. Quite pleasant even. Especially after the first ten minutes, when Phil unexpectedly forgot that you need to not only close your eyes while blinking, but also open them afterwards. He woke up in a dark living room, the light of the muted TV hitting his face, lying in a damn awkward position under a blanket that was far too thick. First thought: his neck will hurt and he'll get a migraine. Second thought: he's not alone.

Wilbur lay beside him, all limbs clung to him so as not to fall off at the first opportunity with a mattress far too narrow for two. His arms rose and fell in steady, measured breaths, and Phil found himself staring at him for a long moment, thinking how the hell he was close to not having him in his life. If he had given up on hearing the title "difficult child" a year earlier, or had given up on his first defeat, or had he ever allowed himself a little doubt at any time - he would not have had this kid with him now. No hands clutching his shirt, no messy hair tickling his nose, no jokes, no forgotten school projects glued together quickly in the middle of the night, no Disney songs permanently etched in his mind...

( *He would be happier elsewhere* , a voice whispered in the back of his head. *He might have a real family.*

Phil felt bad about how terrified the thought was. He felt bad, mean, and like the worst father in the world, because damn, isn't that what it should be about? Wilbur's happiness? That should be the most important thing, it has always been the most important thing... So why was it so terrifying to him that he might lose him? Knowing that Wilbur could be happier elsewhere, but that he himself would never be truly happy again without him?

Was he an egoist if he couldn't hand him over to anyone, even in an imaginary, hypothetical scenario?)

Somewhere in the back of the house a drawer slammed shut. Phil blinked out of his thoughts and, carefully disentangling himself from the kid's embrace, sat up, blinking to adjust his eyes to the darkness. The crash repeated, and it was only then, through a thick layer of sleepiness, that it dawned on him that Techno was nowhere to be found.

Damn it. He managed to lose the child. In my own home. If there had been a Father of the Year competition, he would have been eliminated at the stage of pre-selecting applications.

Third crack. The cogs in Phil's brain slowly gained momentum and a thin thread connected the flickering facts. Ah. Okay. So it's not necessary to call the police.

He made sure Wilbur was still asleep before stretching and heading towards the source of the noise. He didn't try to creep, he didn't want to scare the boy, but when he turned on the light

in the kitchen, Techno - leaning over one of the open drawers - jumped anyway, dropping something metal to the ground. He immediately bent down to pick it up, but he had a hard time with that, because he was already clutching a few other things in his arms.

Phil waited patiently for a moment until the kid could find a way not to lose any of his precious loot. And then another, as the boy straightened and looked defiantly at him, clearly expecting some sort of attack.

"Hey," Phil said finally, pointing his finger at the switch. "You can turn on the light, you know? We still have electricity in this house."

Techno frowned.

"And it happens that you don't?"

If Phil had been a little more alert, he would probably have been disturbed by a calm, even indifferent tone and an absolute lack of surprise, but since he was still mentally far beyond reality, he only shrugged.

"No, not really. I'm going to make scrambled eggs. You want some?"

He wasn't really hungry, to be honest, he never liked to eat right after waking up, and today he had a strong feeling that it would make him feel sick. But he remembered that at the very beginning it was much easier for him to convince Wilbur to accept the food if he had told him that he had planned to prepare it anyway. Otherwise, he usually heard one of the million variants, "I don't want to bother you."

He wasn't sure if Techno had a similar problem at all and if the method actually worked for him, or even if the boy was actually hungry, but what mattered was that he nodded in the end.

"You can sit down if you want." Phil nodded toward him to a chair at the table, reaching into the refrigerator for eggs. "And I promise I won't touch your stuff, so you can put it somewhere for now."

Techno hesitated for a moment, but finally took two steps back and carefully placed the packet of pasta, a few bars, raisins, and dried meat on the counter. And a flashlight, a tin opener, and a small saucepan in which they sometimes warmed the milk. Phil hoped very much that he wouldn't try to light a fire in the center of the room, but would lie to say that he would be particularly surprised. He didn't have time to think about it too long, because before he realized, Techno was standing by him, following his hands as if he actually expected that somewhere between sticking it in the cup and pouring it into the pan, the egg will magically turn into deadly poison.

Phil knew perfectly well that he was the potential source of murderous magic on this list. He just really didn't want to think about it. Not now.

"And done," he announced, shifting the food over two plates, leaving a good portion in the pan. "You want some toast with it?"

Another thing he already noticed - Techno never left any food. He emptied his plate to the last crumb, and while it was kind of a nice change, it wasn't going to be good for his health in the long run. The boy seemed simply unable to leave the table, leaving anything to be eaten on it, and while Phil didn't pay much attention to it for the first three days, it began to bother him gravely over time.

"Techno was vomiting," Wilbur informed him in a whisper, traditionally almost lying on his desk. "In the bathroom. But don't tell him I told you because he told me to shut up about it."

Phil had no idea what to do with that information. The most obvious, logical solution - a specific and honest conversation - was out of the question, as he felt lucky if Techno wanted to be in the same room with him at all. He could, of course, give a long monologue to the closed door of the room, as Wilbur continued to do, but firstly he had a strong suspicion that so far only his son had the privilege of actually being heard in this house, and secondly, Techno would certainly have interpreted his words in some strange, twisted way, and closed in even more.improvise

With a total lack of communication, one of the few things that came to Phil's mind was reducing the portions and asking regularly if he wanted more.

Techno nodded, but ignored the plate Phil pushed towards him, leaning out instead to reach for the other one and immediately backing towards the table as if expecting someone to try to stop it. Because he probably expected. Probably once someone actually tried.

Phil felt a migraine starting to catch him.

On the other hand, the child was sitting at the table and eating - what more could he ask for?

"Here." He handed the boy the first toast (dry - Techno didn't like butter and always scraped it off his sandwiches with his fingers), and quite instinctively he reached out to ruffle his hair, but stopped at the last moment. Fortunately, because the way Techno stared at his wrist made it clear that he was ready to break it at any moment. "Ah. I'm sorry. Can i touch you?"

Techno glared at him, still focusing most of his attention on his hand.

"For what?"

Phil opened his mouth, then closed it again, realizing he didn't quite know what words to use. An honest answer was "Because it would be nice", but absolutely everything about Techno's face and posture revealed that he definitely didn't associate any physical contact with anything pleasant.

"Just like that," he finally replied, and it was stupid, but at least it broke the growing silence.

Techno pressed his back harder against the back of the chair.

"Will you actually listen if I say no?"

"Of course."

"Then keep your hands to you."

Phil couldn't say he hadn't expected it. The only thing that surprised him was how much it hurt him. Perhaps because he wasn't in his best condition. Or maybe because he found it harder and harder to convince his second child when he was constantly worried that he had failed the first one.

"Okay," he smiled anyway, so the boy wouldn't think he had any problem with respecting his space. "You want me to talk to Wilbur about it too?"

Techno shrugged.

"Whatever," he muttered, his tone indicating that he hadn't believed a single word he'd just heard for a second.

It wasn't the best moment to raise more serious topics. It was the middle of the night, they were both tired, and their only interactions were largely based on speaking literally in front of a closed door. But a pile of things selected by rules that Phil had no way of guessing were still bothering him, and wouldn't give up until he at least tried to clear up a few points.

"Techno," he began, waiting patiently for the boy to reluctantly look his way. Not on him, rather on something just above his shoulder, but one he could hardly count on more. "I don't want you to misunderstand me," he noted at the outset. "You can take whatever you want, as long as it's not something very personal. Wilbur is very attached to some of his belongings and sometimes he panics a lot if he can't find something, so please don't take anything from his room, okay?" He smiled as the boy nodded. "Great. And I would be grateful if you didn't touch things in my office. I have a lot of important documents there that I need for work." Another nod. "Besides that, you can take whatever you want. But I also want you to remember that if you need anything you can just ask. You don't have to search in the dark in the kitchen. Just ask and one of us will tell you where what is."

Techno stared at him as a student listened to his teacher's lecture about how far in life he could have gone if he hadn't failed the test again. With a silent "Why the hell are you telling me this and why does it even matter?"

"Okay."

"And you don't have to keep everything in your room. If you say something is yours and we're not allowed to touch it, we'll respect it."

"Yeah. I know."

Phil frowned.

"You literally carry your toothbrush with you instead of leaving it in the bathroom."

Techno grimaced.

"My last brother did gross things with it," he muttered, and the disgust painted on his face made Phil's imagination work far too much.

"Your last brother was a dick, right?" He said, before he could bite his tongue.

Damn it. He said it out loud. He shouldn't be saying it out loud. He wasn't sure why, but he shouldn't... right?

The corners of Techno's mouth twitched in a smile that he immediately nipped in the bud, but Phil had already given himself a big plus for himself.

"Mhm." He was silent for a moment, staring at his own hands, his fingers flexing at such strange angles that Phil was any moment expecting to hear a broken bone snap. "But Wilbur is fine," he muttered suddenly. "He just talks a lot."

Phil couldn't help laughing.

"You won't believe it, but when he was send to me, it was hard to get the full sentence out of him!"

He was right - Techno clearly didn't believe it.

"He's talking to me at the door. All the time."

He didn't sound annoyed, rather very confused, and if he really wanted to silence the other boy, he probably would have just slammed the door a little too close to his forehead, but Phil preferred not to take any chances.

"He really wants to be friends with you. Do you want him to stop doing this?"

As predicted, Techno just shrugged.

"Doesn't matter. It's not annoying, just a bit weird." He paused for a moment, then added, "Don't tell him I said that."

"I heard it myself," said a hoarse voice from somewhere near the door, and they both jumped up on their chairs.

Wilbur, yawning loudly, face flushed and the couch upholstered on his cheek, walked across the kitchen, shuffling the tiles, and climbed into the chair next to Phil, immediately leaning against his side. The man put his arm around him without a second's thought, lest he accidentally land on the floor.

"Hey, my sleepy boy." He leaned in to kiss the top of his head. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the look Techno sent him, but he couldn't tell if it was an expression of extreme disbelief or just disgust. "Hungry?"

Wilbur shook his head, yawning a second time. Phil could bet that even if he tried to eat something, he would end up with his nose in his plate. He glanced at his watch over the table and frowned. It was close to midnight. None of his children were in bed yet, and he had an assignment to complete. Great.

As carefully as he could, he pushed Wilbur away from him so that he could stand up and take him in his arms. He wasn't sure if it was the boy getting heavier every time, or if he himself was getting older. He stuck to the first option for his own sake.

"I'll take him to bed," he said to Techno. "You should go to bed too, it's late. But I won't force you. If you want, you can sit downstairs with me."

Not that he actually had time for it, but he was ready to fail even a million projects, if only in return the boy would open up to him at least slightly.

In a way, this is what he got: the bare minimum.

"Phil?" The boy's voice stopped him with one foot just outside the kitchen doorstep. "Can I get a blanket?"

He blinked in surprise.

"A blanket?" he made sure, because he had been sleeping under the sheets himself for a week and still woke up hot and sweaty. Perhaps the children were coping with the weather better. Maybe he was just too old for the heat. Or for life as such. "Sure. No problem."

When he turned off the light in Wilbur's room a few minutes later and went back downstairs, there was no trace of Techno left. Not that he really expected to find him there. Well, maybe deep in his heart, deep, deep, he had a quiet, naive hope... He left two blankets at the door of his room, one thinner, one slightly thicker, and locked himself back in the office, both disappointed and full of new hope. He felt as if he had taken a step towards changing for the better. Maybe not big, maybe even imperceptible, but definitely important.

He decided to stick to that thought.

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was not a step in the right direction. It was a step towards the cliff, and he realized it only when gravity suddenly smashed him into the ground a million meters lower.

Speaking more precisely and less metaphorically, when reality decided to ask for him, he was standing on the threshold of the room he was still not allowed to enter, holding a newly purchased backpack in his hand. It was early September, and no matter how much Wilbur was moaning and complaining, both boys would be back at school soon. Techno theoretically qualified as one class above, but after a cursory glance at his grades and attendance, Phil knew it wouldn't be good for him. Too many shortcomings to make up for and definitely too much stress. Mainly for him, because the boy himself didn't give a shit about his education and made it very clear that no matter which option Phil would choose, he would still blame him. Just for the joy of making his life difficult.

Okay, he dramatized. Techno just didn't have any motivation and it was hard to be surprised looking at his life so far. Most of the teachers complained that he fell asleep in class, didn't bring textbooks, and when asked why he didn't do his homework, he replies, "I didn't think that I would be still alive, so what was the point?" But with all his sympathy and understanding, Phil couldn't help feeling that he was being tested somehow. Worse, he had no idea whether he had passed or not. Just as he wasn't sure if the decision to put both boys in the same class was quite a good idea. Either they kill each other or together they make other students' lives a hell - nothing in between. But at least they were supposed to end their classes at the same time everyday. One car ride less is always a plus.

Techno didn't feel like taking another trip to the store, so Phil had to decide for himself whether to buy simple notebooks with a single-color cover and look like an old bore or something more colorful and hear that he "treats him like a child." In this respect, Wilbur was much easier to use - on the cover of the last notebook he played five tic-tac-toe games with Schlatt. Phil just stopped trying to make sure his school supplies looked at least minimally aesthetically pleasing than the contents of the garbage can.

As it turned out, Techno paid no attention to the notebooks, to the new textbooks, to the million types of crayons, felt-tip pens and paints that Phil had thrown into the basket in the hope that something would catch his attention. He was, however, very interested in his new backpack and examined it from all sides, carefully checking the strength of the straps and zippers.

"It's a little small," he finally assessed, testing the side pockets. "Not everything will fit in."

Considering that Phil had a hard time carrying the backpack after stuffing all the textbooks inside, it was a bit disturbing. Have all the public schools tried to break the children's backbones?



"I think it's just right. You're going to school, not camping," he joked, but Techno just pursed his lips and looked away and... *Oh.*

*Oh.*

Phil sometimes wondered how he could be so stupid. All logic dictated that he should have fallen victim to natural selection long ago.

Warm shoes. Thick jacket. Thick blanket, pot and tin opener. Food disappearing from the kitchen and a large, roomy backpack...

*Not everything will fit in...*

Techno really didn't plan to stay.

Phil had to admit he was somewhat impressed. When he was about seven or eight, he took offense at his parents and decided to run away from home. He took with him three bars of chocolate, a can of Cola and a collection of cards. And rubber boots, for a reason. He remembered sitting in the garage for eternity (two hours, it turned out later) before he felt sick to the excess sweetness and, after deep reflection, decided to postpone his escape to another date. Somewhat less rainy and cold.

Techno was definitely not that naive. He had a plan and he knew what he was doing better than any child his age should. He was ten, damn it! He should build pillow forts and crush cookies for the couch, not wondering how to protect himself from potential hypothermia! He should be worried about finding friends in the new school, not planning to run away from home!

*Fuck.*

At what point did he fail so much? Was there any one particular moment at all? He really thought that they were doing well, that something was changing for the better, that some thread of understanding was slowly forming between them... Okay, maybe not between them, not so directly. But Techno liked Wilbur, and Phil was sure that would be enough in the long run. With time he will find out that he's not in any danger, he'll feel a little more confident and maybe slowly, slowly, very slowly open up and begin to trust Phil as well.

Maybe he was too naive. Maybe he just didn't see all the signs until one of them was punched right in the face. Fuck, of course he didn't see the signs! Techno started planning everything the moment he entered his home, and Phil only made it easier for him.

He must have looked really weird because when the child's voice called him back to reality, the boy stared at him as if he wasn't sure Phil was having a seizure, or if it was going to attack him.

"Are you okay?"

He shook his head.

"Yes, it's just..." *I took a moment to remember that I had something to live for and I couldn't just throw it all to hell.* "I was lost in thoughts for a moment. You want me to help you with..." The door nearly hit his nose. "Ah. Okay. Let me know if you need anything!"

Techno didn't let him know. And the person who needed help the most was Phil himself.

\* \* \*

Techno made one decisive mistake in his plan - he assumed that Phil sometimes sleeps rather than just lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking about all the mistakes he has made in life. It was hard to blame him, especially when he'd done the rest to the smallest detail, but it didn't change the fact that when he opened the door two nights later, Phil was ready. He stepped out into the corridor just as he heard cautious footsteps on the stairs and waited a moment, not wanting to scare the boy to death. He still hoped deep down that he was wrong and the kid just went to the kitchen to get a glass of water and would be back lugging half of their pantry into the room. But when he finally leaned out of the corner, squinting to see anything in the pale lantern light streaming through the windows, Techno definitely didn't look like he was planning on going back to bed. Not now, not in a minute, nor ever. He was wearing a heavy sweater, long pants and autumn boots, a backpack hung over one shoulder, covered with a cover of sticky plastic bags, probably in the event of rain. On the other shoulder, a little less fitting the image of the little world conqueror, hung a plush bear tied a bundle-like with robe strap.

If Phil hadn't been so tired and scared at the same time, he would have found the sight quite cute. But the child was actually trying to find the exit door key in the drawer (which Phil had wisely hidden elsewhere), and when he failed to find it, he headed for the window with equal determination. Not cute. Definitely not cute.

"Hi."

The boy jumped, gasping for breath, and turned so violently that he almost knocked the pot off the windowsill with his backpack. Phil felt almost silly. Almost. He was much more concerned not to fly down the stairs in the dark. He found the light switch, and they both winced, blinded for a second.

Techno quickly shook off the shock. He glanced at Phil, the window still closed, clearly reckoned if he could open it, climb onto the sill, and jump out before he was caught, and rightly judged that there was no chance of that. So instead he stepped back behind the couch.

"I'll hit you back," he warned, and as much as it would have sounded a lot more menacing if he hadn't been trembling with fear, there was no doubt that he was really capable of it. "Hit

me and I'll hit you back."

Phil nodded, not trying to close the distance between them.

"Good."

Techno took another step back, sliding the backpack off his shoulder and gripping his fingers tightly on the handle. Phil wasn't sure if he planned to use it as a shield or rather throw it at the attacker, but both seemed pretty clever. And goddamn sad.

"I'm not joking. Just try it and I-"

"Good," he repeated, slowly raising his hands so the boy could see them all the time. "I'm glad that you know how to defend yourself. Although it's really, really sad that you had to learn this." He paused for a moment, waiting for any reaction, and after a few seconds of tense silence, he sighed heavily. "How about hot chocolate? It always helps Wilbur to calm down."

Techno didn't seem to feel calmer at all. More like he was on the verge of hysteria.

"What do you want?!"

Phil looked at the scared child again. He seemed perfectly prepared for any eventuality, and the man hated the thought that he had probably experienced most of them by now.

"I want to sit down and talk," he said, still holding his palms up. "Calmly. I promise not to try anything weird. Full distance, or you can "hit me back" as you put it. How about that?"

He took a hesitant step towards the kitchen. Techno immediately tensed, carefully following his every move.

"I don't trust you," he said, and Phil sighed inwardly.

"I know. In fact, you don't have any reason to trust me, do you? But I don't think I have done anything bad enough not to deserve a chance either."

Techno was silent, but the answer was more than enough that when Phil returned to the room a few minutes later carrying two mugs of chocolate, the boy was sitting on the couch instead of being halfway to the neighboring town.

"Here it is." He set the drinks on the table, taking a seat as far as possible on the couch. Apparently still too close, for there was an immediate partition between them in the form of a backpack.

Techno glanced at the mugs, then at Phil, and to no one's surprise, he reached for the one set further away from him.

The house was completely silent, the air was warm but not hot as daytime, and outside the windows the sky was slowly pink in the morning light. Under normal circumstances, it would be a very nice start to the day. Maybe Phil would have liked to move them from five in the

morning somewhere closer to noon, but still - he liked spending time with his kids, even when they weren't talking, or they were just doing their own thing in the same room. There was something comfortable and reassuring about being close to each other. Something nice about knowing that at any moment one of them can start talking and the other will just listen.

Techno was clearly not comfortable. Phil had no idea how to change it, considering that he himself was the main problem in the eyes of the child, but he still decided to try.

"You took Steve," he said.

Techno scowled at him.

"You can take him if you want," he grunted, although his fingers gripped the fur of the soft toy pressed against his side. "I don't care.

A few weeks after Wilbur finally started to feel a little more at home, Phil asked him why he was so reluctant to admit he liked something.

"Earlier, in the previous family... the main one, not the later ones," the boy began, referring to the house where he spent most of his childhood and which Phil absolutely hated, "when I did something wrong, they took away my things. And the more I liked something, the more often it disappeared. So I tried not to show that I liked something because then I could have had it a little longer."

Phil still remembered how much just hearing about it had broken his heart. Watching Techno clench his hand tightly on the bear's paw was like opening an old, healed wound.

"I don't want to take anything from you," he assured him, though he knew it wouldn't do much. The kid was ready to pop out the window - it was obvious that if he had to choose between the hungry crocodiles and Phil, he would have chosen the crocodiles. "And I'm not angry if that's what you're afraid of," he added, noting with some relief that the boy's shoulders had relaxed a bit. "And even if I were, I still wouldn't hurt you." He sighed heavily, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "I really wish you'd believe me."

Techno snorted loudly.

"I really wish people'd stop lying."

It was hard to disagree with him.

"Yes. Me too."

The boy frowned, glancing at him expectantly, as if he expected Phil to convince him and forcibly prove that he had no evil intentions. When nothing of the sort happened, he stared at the cup in his hand for a moment, then carefully took a small sip from it. He waited a moment and drank almost half in two huge gulps.

"You didn't tell me," he grunted, setting the mug on the table. "That Wilbur isn't your real son. You didn't tell me."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment.

"He *is* my son. Very very *real one*." He wasn't sure if he was convincing the boy or himself. He hoped it worked for the first case, at least. "But it's true that we're technically not related. I didn't want to lie to you, I just... He's a son to me, whether adopted or not. But I should tell you," he admitted. "I didn't think that might help you feel a little more confident." He turned his own cup over in his hands. He had the impression that only yesterday had been sitting here with Wilbur, explaining to him that he would never, ever give him to anyone. "You know, Wilbur looked a lot like you when he came to live with me. Less pugnacious, but also afraid of his own shadow. Although he didn't try to pop out the window. This's news to me."

Techno immediately spiked up.

"I'm not afraid at all!"

Phil had to hold back very hard not to laugh because really, the kid was sitting next to him, clinging to the stuffed animal like a shield and flinching every time he saw too much of a movement, but he wasn't afraid at all. He hasn't seen anything so sad in a long time.

"Okay. If you say so. But that's okay if you are." He set the mug down on the coffee table and straightened, exhaling slowly. He ignored the boy's immediate pressure on the back of the couch. "Listen. How about a little deal?"

Techno looked at him suspiciously.

"Deal?"

"You'll give me a month. One month for me to convince you that it's worth staying. If I fail and you still want to..." He frowned. "In fact, what was your plan? Sleep at the train station?"

"Under the tent."

"You have a tent?"

"Not yet."

Phil decided he preferred not to know more after all.

"Okay. So if you still want to camp in a month's time, I'll send you back and you can do whatever you want. I dare say that it's easier to run away from the center than from here."

The boy clearly took it as a challenge.

"I can run out of here whenever I want, just like there."

"Yes, but *I* will really try to find you."

Did it sound like a threat? Damn, he didn't want it to sound like that... But on the other hand, wasn't it a threat in some strange sense?

Techno must have come to similar conclusions, because he frowned and looked at him with a mixture of anxiety and some kind of respect. As if he appreciated the determination, even if it happened to be aimed at him, and it definitely thwarted his plans.

"A month," he said finally, just as Phil was starting to fear he wouldn't get an answer. "But I make no promises, and I'm out of here when you do something weird."

'When', not 'if'. Phil tried to pretend that the accusation didn't hurt him at all. Instead, he smiled as honestly as he could, considering all the little positive transitions that night.

"Agreed." He made no attempt to seal the deal with a handshake. "You should go back to bed. It's really late. Or rather early." He stood up, stretching, but his eyes fell on the backpack still separating them. "Oh." He hesitated. But there's no chance for the title of Good Parent anymore, so screw that. "I probably shouldn't be saying this, but you prepared really well for it. If I tried something similar at your age, I would freeze the first night."

Techno frowned.

"It's summer."

"You underestimate my power."

He left the boy alone in the living room, wanting to give him time to calmly gather his things. And maybe a little to prove that he relies on their deal and believes that he won't have to chase the fugitive down the street in a moment. Even so, he only breathed a sigh of relief when Techno closed the door to his room behind him a few minutes later.

There was no way he would fall asleep, but he fell on the bed anyway, hoping that he would at least get some physical rest. Why had no one told him that raising kids was so damn hard? Would he have changed his mind if he had known what he knows today a year ago? No, rather not. But at least he would feel less disappointed with himself. And that's something.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all comments! ❤️

I have a little shitty time now and they give me a lot of serotonin!

And happy Holidays! 🐰🐣 Please stay safe and have fun!

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

Just to let you know, @SylviaoftheDepths made this chapter a 1000% better!

Phil made a mistake. He wasn't quite sure how and when, but he definitely did something very, very wrong. He wasn't naive enough to assume that their nighttime conversation would make a big difference, but he hoped for a bit of stabilization. At minimum, good intentions. Chances. Meanwhile, Techno not only didn't look at him any more favorably, but also clearly set out to make Phil's life a living hell.

He wasn't actually doing anything really bad. He hadn't murdered anyone, hadn't broken any law, and most importantly, had never done anything that would directly hurt Wilbur. It was about little, seemingly insignificant behavior that he repeated so often, in such numbers and with such obvious premeditation that Phil had to re-think why he had ever wanted children at all.

"Wipe your shoes!" He called from the kitchen as the boys, hot and thirsty, burst into the house through the patio door.

Techno, just bending down to take off his sneakers, immediately straightened up, looked him straight in the eye and walked across the living room, trailing tons of sand behind him.

"Can you pass me the salt?" He asked at lunch, and the boy immediately pushed the salt shaker to a farther corner of the table.

"Don't slam the door," he admonished, and for the next ten minutes he only heard the slamming of the door in question, over and over again, until Techno finally got bored.

They weren't big things. Leaving the dishes on the table instead of putting them in the sink, ignoring him when he asked for anything, sitting in the living room long after the hour he should have been in bed, even when Phil, in desperation, turned off the TV and the lights. Nothing that he should really do a big deal of, and nothing that he shouldn't expect. What he didn't really expect was how much it got on his nerves. He had never expected that he would ever look at parents yelling at a child in a supermarket and feel only a surge of sympathy instead of indignation. And a bit of jealousy, because God knows that he wanted to do the same more and more often. He *would* have done the same, were it not for the absolute certainty that he would have paid a very high price for that single moment of satisfaction, and that the last few months of slowly building trust would have gone to hell immediately.

Damn it. He was a bad man. He was a bad man who didn't even have anyone to tell that, because his contact list on the phone consisted of his children, his children's friends, and his

coworkers, whom he hated just a little more than himself.

He had to pull himself together. He didn't quite know how, but he had to think of something and do it quickly before he would go completely crazy or do something that he would regret very much afterwards. He was the only family member to welcome Monday with open arms. A few hours in an empty, quiet house! Without children! He hadn't looked forward to anything so much in a long time.

Of course, it hadn't been easy at all to herd them out the door that morning. While the whining of a sleepy Wilbur was rather amusing, Techno had clearly decided that if he was going to school, it would be in style or not at all. Phil wisely woke both boys much earlier than he needed to, rightly assuming it'd take them some time to get used to the school routine and it would take longer than usual to get dressed. But somehow, when they finally got into the car, they were still late. Perhaps because Phil had to ask three times before Techno even wanted to leave the room. Or because he blocked up the bathroom for a good half an hour. Or finally because, although he had been asked to do so several times, he hadn't packed the books the night before.

Phil was really, really tired. And it was only eight o'clock.

"Everyone have everything?" he made sure, backing up from the driveway.

Two unenthusiastic murmurs answered him, and he turned onto the main road, trying to enjoy the blessed silence. Which Techno interrupted ten minutes later, saying that he'd forgotten a few notebooks and a lunch box.

Phil hit the brakes a bit too hard, but really, could anyone blame him? Except for himself, of course.

"He's doing it on purpose," Wilbur muttered as they pulled up to the house and Techno, completely unhurriedly, went looking for notebooks.

Phil was of the same opinion, but only sighed heavily.

"Everyone has the right to have a bad day."

The boy grimaced and folded his arms over his chest.

"He's not having a bad day. He wants *you* to have a bad day! He's just mean."

Phil rested his forehead against the steering wheel, closing his eyes for a few precious seconds. He only looked up when the back door opened and then closed with a loud bang.

"Done."

"Great." He reached out to collect the boy's keys. "Did you close the door?"

Techno unbuckled his seat belt without saying a word and got out of the car once more. Phil mentally counted to ten. Wilbur began humming a funeral march.



Somehow they managed to get to the school on time and not kill anyone along the way. Mostly because Phil made sure to keep his hands busy.

"Okay, are you sure you have *everything* now?" He turned to the boys. Neither deign to answer him, Techno too busy being offended at the whole world for a reason that only he himself understood, and Wilbur already with one foot out the door.

"Schlatt!"

Phil sighed heavily. It was slowly becoming a habit, and it would probably soon make him the leading cause of the spike in carbon dioxide emissions. As long as he didn't fall over from exhaustion earlier.

He got out of the car, wincing as Techno followed suit and immediately seized the opportunity to slam the door.

"Are you sure you don't want me to escort you to the room?" he made sure, trying to ignore the soft voice telling him to jump into the car, press on the gas and drive away with a screech of tires. He hated himself for the relief he felt when the boy shook his head. "Okay. Wilbur will show you everything. Hold on to him, and if you get lost, don't be afraid to ask someone for directions. If you say you're in the same class as him, most people will know who you're talking about. He's..." he looked at his son, gesturing lively and practically jumping in place while Schlatt sipped his canned Coke with a completely indifferent expression.

"Characteristic."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"He's loud," he muttered, and though his tone was rather gruff, there was something about his expression, in the brief look he gave the slowly growing group of children, that he wasn't as confident as he would have liked to be. "And there's a lot of kids around him."

Phil felt his heart soften in spite of all his frustration. He would never call himself an introvert, he was closer to "I don't care about your opinion and I don't have time to listen to you waste oxygen," but he still had the empathy to imagine the enormity of the stress he was putting the boy under.

"Hey, kiddo." He crouched down, patiently waiting a few seconds for Techno to look at him. "I know you're nervous. I'm not telling you that you have no reason because you have a whole lot of them, but I promise you will be fine. And if it isn't, you can always tell me and we'll come up with something together. Okay?"

For a moment he was sure that he had finally managed to do something right. For one brief moment as Techno's face softened and his shoulders relaxed, as if he was finally letting someone take some of the weight off them. However, the impression passed as quickly as it came and the boy frowned as he took a step back.

"I don't need your help," he grunted, gripping tightly on the shoulder straps of his backpack. "And I don't need your stupid advice."

Phil would have been eager to say that he didn't feel offended in any way. Because just a few weeks ago, he would only feel a rush of sympathy for a child who has clearly been painfully disappointed so many times that he completely lost confidence in adults. But now, with all the problems he had going on in his life, and with the absolute lack of energy and motivation to solve them, he took the words very, very personally.

"All right," he forced a smile. "My stupid advice and I will still be around if you need us after all."

If Techno had a brilliant answer to that as well, he didn't have time to deliver it.

"Hi."

They both automatically turned to face the voice. Phil was almost ashamed of the joy he felt at the sight of the familiar green sweatshirt, freckled face, and thick hair that, with a lot of blinding light and lots of good intentions, could be described as "blonde".

It wasn't an "Oh, great, my child has a chance to make a friend right from the start!" joy. It was a "Oh my God, thank you, someone will take him away from me!" joy and he already entered it into the list of "Things that I will remind myself of at two in the morning and I won't be able to sleep anymore".

"Good morning, Clay."

The boy nodded at him, but otherwise paid no attention to him.

"Dream." He reached out to Techno, and unlike Wilbur, he didn't relent until the other boy finally shook his hand with obvious reluctance. "You're Wilbur's new brother, aren't you?"

Techno made a face that said he would rather be dismembered alive than be called that again.

"He's not my brother."

"Okay, okay, whatever. Is "Techno" really your *real name*?"

Phil definitely didn't have the strength to participate in this conversation any longer. Children's scuffles usually entertained and touched him, but he had to agree with Wilbur - Dream could be terribly stubborn and didn't know when to let go.

"I'll be leaving, okay?" He turned to Techno, while he still had a chance to get at least a bare minimum of his attention. "If anything happens, tell Wilbur to call me."

He didn't get any specific answer, but he was quite content to know that the boy had heard and took note of his words. He waved at his other child, who was too busy imparting the tasks of his entire summer to his friends in one single exhalation to even notice. Usually he didn't like to leave without saying goodbye. Sometimes he even stood by the car and waited until the first bell to make sure Wilbur would safely cover the last fifty meters in a straight line and be in class safe and sound. There was something reassuring about the children disappearing inside the door. Not the longing for school, but the realization that he had

already passed this period himself and would never have to worry about a math test or stress about someone laughing at his new shoes again. Adulthood had its undoubted advantages.

But usually that was what would happen. Today, he would a hundred times more rather sit in class and try to disappear, lest the teacher accidentally pick on him to answer, than pore over assignments which he couldn't concentrate on. At the same time, he was looking forward to the moment when he would finally close the door behind him and finally be surrounded by a blissful, undisturbed silence, allowing him to feel sorry for himself and sink into his own despair.

"Phil?"

Fuck. Why couldn't this day just be good?

Still with his hand on the doorknob, in case it was, by some miracle, about another Phil, he turned to the strange man.

"Yes?" He really tried to summon a bit of enthusiasm, but everything he could do was a very fake smile that made his face ache.

"Phil, right?" He nodded. "Darryl." The name meant absolutely nothing to him. "Or 'Bad'. The kids call me that. I don't really know why..." Phil still had no idea what that was about either, but he began to hope very much that "kids" didn't include any of his boys. His face must have betrayed him, because after a moment of embarrassing silence, the man added hesitantly, "Sapnap's dad?"

Phil breathed a sigh of relief. He won't have to testify to the police and in court! Tens of hours saved!

"Oh! Sorry, I couldn't connect the dots for a second there."

He ignored the fact that he had no way of 'connecting the dots'. Was it normal to know the parents of all your children's friends? He knew Schlatt's parents, and he was always sure that was enough. Was there any parental bundle from which he had unconsciously excluded himself?

"Yhm." They stared at each other for a moment, one grinning broadly, the other closer and closer to the state where being nice to strangers ceased to be a priority. It was only when Phil gave a meaningful glance at the doorknob he was still gripping at that Darryl seemed to wake up from his brooding. "Oh, yeah! Um, I just wanted to apologize for that last fire in the backyard. I'm really sorry and if I can..."

Phil was slowly starting to believe in God - there was no way this day could be so bad on its own, it had to be some higher entity behind it who hated him very, very much.

"Honestly speaking, I don't know much about it and I wish it would stay that way."

Darryl nodded with the understanding that only one weary parent can feel towards another.

"Sure. It's hard to disagree when your kid is the one burning things... So that's Techno, right?" He nodded toward the school, and Phil slowly let go of the doorknob, losing all hope of a quick end to the conversation. Apparently, it was never meant to be. "Sapnap mentioned Wilbur 'got a new brother.'"

They both looked at the boy to whom Dream was still lecturing something with passion worth a better response than boredom bordering on irritation.

Phil hesitated.

"You can put it like that, yes," he admitted, although he knew that Techno would have corrected him immediately. On the other hand, he would probably correct him no matter what he said. Just like that, for the joy of spiting him...

"You're okay?" Darryl looked at him with genuine concern. He was taller, just overall so bloody tall, which made the question sound a bit patronizing. "You look tired."

Phil almost laughed.

"Honestly? I'm not sure if I can make it home and not hit a tree on the way. Not that I would fall asleep at the wheel, I would just really, really like to hit something... Just kidding, just kidding!" He added quickly. "Unless..."

Phil wasn't sure if he had convinced anyone. Certainly not himself, and Darryl looked disturbingly close to taking his keys from him.

"Mhm..." He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Then he blurted out, "Would you like a coffee?"

Phil wouldn't. He didn't want coffee, he didn't want anyone's company, he didn't want to leave the house ever again for the rest of his life.

That's why ten minutes later he was sitting in the coffee shop, staring at the steaming cup of coffee. Because in life we don't always get what we want. But sometimes, by some miracle and a mistake in the Matrix, we get what we just accidentally need.

The place was nice, cozy, with colorful upholstery on the chairs, relaxing music from the speakers and working air conditioning. Phil was absolutely sure he would like it, if he had any more energy to feel anything.

"I just realized," he said, pouring sugar into his coffee one teaspoon after another, imagining it to be arsenic, "that I don't remember the last time I spoke to someone who was under ten and not my child. Or their social worker. It feels like years...!"

Darryl, who had been staring at him with growing disbelief since the fifth spoon of sugar, automatically nodded.

"Children take up time."

Phil raised a hand, thumb and forefinger almost touching.

"I'm this close to losing my shit."

He wasn't kidding. He didn't even try to pretend he was joking.

But the coffee was really good. Just a little too sweet.

If Darryl hadn't regretted his surge of kindness so far, he'd most likely just started. He looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else now, and at the same time as if he was afraid to leave, to later read in the newspapers about the massacre in a nearby cafe later.

"If it comforts you, it felt the same way when we adopted Sapnap. It will get better."

It sounded like any common parenting bullshit as always, and Phil was halfway through rolling his eyes when something in his head clicked and he connected the information.

"Wait." He frowned. "Sapnap is adopted?"

For some reason, Darryl looked just as surprised.

"Yes? Um, I thought it was obvious?"

Phil took a quick scan of his head to see if anything could indicate this.

"No? Not really?"

"Oh." Darryl took a sip of his coffee. Phil wanted to knock the cup out of his hand. He needed an answer. Now. "Wilbur didn't tell you?"

"Wilbur knew that?! Of course he didn't tell me! He never tells me anything important! Recently, Schlatt was sick and he talked to him on the phone for two solid hours. But when I asked if Schlatt would come back to school on Monday, he said 'he didn't really ask about it.' So you talked about *what?!*" He tapped his hand on the table and immediately regretted it when he almost knocked over his cup. He needed that caffeine to get home somehow, he couldn't lose it. Oh, and maybe he didn't want to go completely crazy in front of someone who could potentially turn out to be a source of important clues. "Sorry."

"It's fine." It was definitely not 'fine', but Darryl looked surprisingly... resigned to that fact. He was obviously concerned, but his expression seemed to say "Ah, yes, this shit again". "Really, that's okay. Skeppy has these kinds of breakdowns sometimes too."

Phil buried his face in hands, sighing heavily. When did it get so difficult? Talking to people, but also life as such?

"Should I know who Skeppy is?"

There was silence between them for a good three seconds.

"My husband?"

Phil slowly raised his head, straightening up.

"Oh." He blinked. "Ooooh! *That's* why it's obvio-... Oooh..." He laughed, but immediately stopped when he realized that no, the situation wasn't all that funny. He just had all his emotions cranked up at that point where he would be amused by a car crash and he couldn't explain exactly why. "Sorry, I had no idea..." He cleared his throat, trying to pass himself as normal. Or at least mentally healthy. "So, Sapnap was adopted?"

Darryl was obviously beginning to regret sharing that information with him. But he was still smiling and clearly intent on it. Under normal circumstances, Phil decided he would have liked him.

"Yhm. But he was an infant then. I think it's really great that you've adopted older kids, it must be a lot harder than-"

"Did he ever," Phil cut him off. Not that he didn't like to hear what a good person he was, but he needed facts to keep it that way. "Like... asking about his real family?"

For the first time, Darryl looked genuinely outraged. Oddly enough, he wasn't sure what for, given Phil was sure he had given him a few reasons to get angry before and he had ignored them all.

"We're his *real* family," he said emphatically, and oh, Phil felt as if he were just pushing the blade still in his heart deeper.

Fuck. Why the hell was he asking that? Why the hell was he hurting himself even more?

"Yes. Sure." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers, feeling an overwhelming urge to let go of the whole mountain of regret in him. He knew he shouldn't, and that no one else cared about it at all, but he was absolutely sure that he wouldn't be able to hold out and would explode at the slightest moment. "Sorry, really, that's not what I meant. I just..."

He couldn't stand it.

He wouldn't say he spilled his guts. That wouldn't get to the heart of the scene. If he were to be a little less metaphorical and a little more gross, he would say he had vomited all the stress of the last weeks onto a stranger, heartlessly taking advantage of the poor man's lack of immediate available escape. And he clearly wanted to escape. Phil saw it in his eyes. He nodded and even patted his hand consolingly, but his gaze wandered over and over to the door. Phil had to give it to him, however- even as a hostage with no choice, he was a good listener. He didn't interrupt, he nodded at the right moments, and at times even made short comments that actually fit.

The situation with Wilbur was particularly interesting to him, which came as no surprise. He probably felt more connected to that than to "I took in a difficult child and I hate that he acts like a difficult child."

"Did you talk to him about this?" He asked as Phil shut for a second and took a breath.

"No," he muttered, and realized immediately how silly that sounded. He had confided in a complete stranger, but could not talk to his own kid. "Like... no. I guess I'm afraid he'll tell

me that again, right in the eye. I feel like I have completely failed."

(A voice in his head whispered that it was not just a feeling, but a fact.

Phil was damn sure a moment later, he would just cry.)

Darryl frowned.

"Um... You know, I'm sorry if this sounds weird... but it really doesn't make sense. I saw how Wilbur was a year ago. And I can see how he is now. He's like a different kid. He's much happier since he's been living with you."

Phil stirred the paltry remnants of cold coffee. His hand was shaking to such an extent that he tapped the teaspoon against the sides of the cup several times.

"I thought so, too," he admitted. "That's why I don't understand any of it. When we were alone, I could have sworn he saw me as a father."

Darryl hummed understandingly. Phil was absolutely sure they could become good friends. It was a pity that he would probably never want to see him again, but sometimes you had to give one good thing up for another.

"Go back and talk to him. Otherwise, you will stress yourself to death."

Phil wanted to say he was already halfway there, but he bit his tongue.

"You're probably right," he replied, because what else would he say? He finished the rest of his coffee in one gulp. "I should leave." Not that he actually had something important to do, he just felt slightly better for the time being and wanted to use that momentum to get home. "I have an appointment for a client who doesn't like that his site looks like the absolute minimum he paid me for." They both stood up, staring at each other for awkward seconds, not knowing whether to shake for a goodbye or not. "So... Say hello to your husband?"

Darryl grinned, perhaps for the first time in twenty minutes.

"Thank you. I will."

"I'm really going to kill Wilbur for not telling me," he joked, trying at least to get remembered for something other than a nervous breakdown.

"Please don't do that. I don't think Sappnap will ever find a new friend whose parents won't be mad that their garden has nearly burned down three times already."

Phil stopped smiling.

"What do you mean 'three times'?"

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

Just being beted. Feeling good.  
All thanks to @SylviaoftheDepths.

Also, thank you guys for all comments and kudos!

It took Phil all afternoon to pull himself together and mentally prepare for the upcoming conversation. He thought about it as he sent responses to customers, burned his dinner, and drove the car, which wasn't particularly sensible. He was so engrossed in it that he hardly noticed Techno sitting right behind him, stubbornly kicking the driver's seat. Almost. He put it on the list of problems that he would deal with later, on the principle that one child was enough to deal with at a time or he would just end up killing both. The rule was new and he wasn't sure if it would work in the long run, but so far it was only thanks to it that Techno could consume his dinner in three seconds and immediately barricade himself in his room. Alive. And slamming the doors.

Wilbur must have sensed that something more serious was coming, because he volunteered to help with the washing up. Phil sent him off to do his homework to get a few more minutes to reassure himself that no, there was no other choice, and the sooner he did it, the better it would be for everyone. And who knew, there could even be a chance that he would finally be able to sleep peacefully! An eternal dream too, because if everything went according to his worst assumptions, he was honestly ready to just shoot himself in the head and be done with it all.

When he finally knocked on Wilbur's door, he didn't feel any more confident.

"Hi."

The boy, of course, was as far from doing his homework as possible. He was sitting up in bed listening to music on the earphones that he slipped around his neck as soon as Phil opened the door a crack.

"Hi." He grinned, then frowned when he didn't get an equally enthusiastic answer.  
"Something happened?"

Phil shook his head, not looking in his direction. Instead, he walked over to the window and for a long moment stared more at the glass than at the view behind it. He should clean it. In fact, he could do it even now, since he had nothing important to do. The access of sunlight has a very good effect on the development of children, especially those of school age. And he would save on electricity...



*Oh for God sake...!*

*Get a grip!*

He turned to Wilbur and immediately cursed in his mind as he saw how anxiously the boy was watching him, clearly tense, his arms wrapped around his chin-tucked knees. Muffled music continued to flow from the forgotten headphones set aside.

"I did something bad?" He asked, because damn it, of course, that was the conclusion he had come to. Phil himself would have suspected the worst if someone had crashed into his bedroom and mentally moved to another dimension without a word of explanation.

"Of course not." He tries to sound as gentle as possible when moving to sit next to him on the bed, close enough to show that everything was okay, but also careful to give the child space. "Sorry, I got lost in thought. I just wanted to see what you were doing." He reached out and Wilbur visibly relaxed, immediately squeezing his hand. "I've had less time for you lately. I'm sorry."

The boy shrugged.

"It's okay," he assured, which on the one hand was nice and reassuring, but on the other hand exhausted the topic and the room went quiet again, save for Alexander Hamilton singing somewhere in the background about how well he knew death. Phil fucking envied him for his acquaintance.

He had to say something. Now. He was an adult, he was a father and he would talk to his son like a serious, mature man... On three.

*One, two...*

"You didn't tell me Sapnap was adopted."

*Fuck.*

Okay, in his own defense - this was a topic he also wanted to bring up. A little later, but ultimately time was a relative concept, matter permeated and all those other wise things smart people around the world said...

Wilbur didn't seem to think he was smart at this point.

"I thought it was obvious," he said, sounding strangely familiar. Not necessarily in a way Phil would like.

"In what way?"

The boy raised an eyebrow. His gaze said he was seriously considering whether or not he was just being prompted to fill in the silence at this point, because it was impossible for him to be that stupid. Phil decided to remind him of that in the future when he again wouldn't understand how basic math worked.

"He has two dads. It's not like he can be really 'theirs'."

"I didn't know about that either."

"That he can't?"

"Wilbur..."

The boy shifted uneasily.

"Is that... a problem?"

Phil closed his eyes, scrutinizing all his life choices for the answer to the question "Why does my kid think I'm a dick?"

"No, of course not," he assured, as he preferred not to leave any ambiguities on this point. "But it would be nice to know that I have someone to talk to."

Wilbur stepped back a little so he could lean his back against the wall, suddenly keenly interested in checking whether or not he made sure his socks were rolled up neatly. Without his warmth, Phil's hand felt bloody cold and empty.

"Sapnap isn't like me and Techno," he muttered, still more to his feet than to anyone else. "He doesn't understand us. Not really."

Phil immediately felt even worse than before. He didn't think that Wilbur would see it from his own perspective and through the prism of his own situation. Through the eyes of a child who for the vast majority of his life never felt loved and always stood out from his peers. Was he jealous that Sapnap had more luck in his life and didn't have to go through everything he had? Did he wonder what went wrong and at what stage, who decided- and why- that he was not worth getting a home, having a family, and feeling safe? Was he angry at Phil that he hadn't shown up sooner, that he hadn't found him before anyone else had the chance to hurt him?

Phil certainly felt sorry for that.

"No," he admitted, making a note to his head to be sure to come back to this subject. And highlighting it three times. Bright red marker. "But his dads can understand me."

Wilbur blinked.

"Oh. I didn't think about that. Sorry," he smiled and it was clear he meant that. Phil was seriously afraid that his heart might not be able to take it. His child really was a million times more mature and smarter than he was, and Phil definitely didn't deserve to call him 'his'. "Phil? Are you sure you are okay?"

But speaking of that...

"I wanted to talk to you about something," he began and immediately added, "You didn't do anything wrong. But something you said... I would like to know if you really mean it."

The boy pressed his lips together tightly and nodded his readiness.

"Okay?"

Phil wanted to feel half as ready.

"You spoke to Techno a few days ago. He neatly omitted the point that he shouldn't have witnessed this conversation at all. Details, details, why bother with them at all... "And you said you're not my son. 'Not a *real one* '."

Wilbur nodded.

"Yea," he said, clearly expecting some kind of continuation.

There was no continuation. Just as there was no longer any hope that everything would turn out to be a mistake, that he only heard something wrong and misunderstood.

If Phil hadn't been bleeding out slowly for a few days, he'd probably feel stabbed straight through the heart right now.

When he finally managed to breathe out something, his voice was so weak he could barely hear it himself.

"You really think so?"

"Well... " Wilbur must have realized that there was some inner drama going on in front of his eyes, but he was not quite able to find its source. "It's true, isn't it? I'm not," he said, unconsciously adding another brick to the grave Phil was already building in his mind. "Why are you so sad?"

He wasn't sad. He was "sad" when they canceled his favorite show. Now? Now he was sick with despair and on the verge of suicidal thoughts.

"Wilbur... Listen to me." He took the boy's hand again and breathed a sigh of relief as he returned the hug. Maybe he didn't see him as his real father, but apparently he still trusted him. That's good. This is more than enough. He will just have to lower the bar a bit and try even harder, and maybe one day... "I don't know how you see it, but for me you were always my son, from the very beginning. And I love you more than you can imagine."

Wilbur nodded very slowly, never taking his eyes off him.

"I love you too?" He assured hesitantly, clearly still trying to understand what was actually going on and what they were really talking about. "But it doesn't change anything, doesn't it? You aren't my real father."

Phil closed his eyes.

"I was trying to be."

This time, Wilbur had no qualms about treating him like a real moron. It was becoming a habit for him.

"How?" He frowned and straightened, immediately taking his favorite 'I'll explain this to you in a moment' tone. "Phil, you can't... I watch nature films, Phil. I know where babies come from. You can't be someone's dad, like, *after* the fact. You know how it works, don't you?" He waited a moment for an answer, but got none. "Oh. It's okay if you don't know. I can explain to you..."

Phil held up a hand to silence him, too struck by what he had just heard to speak.

"Wilbur..." he tried, and then fell silent again. The gears in his head were doing three hundred percent of the norm at full speed. "When you say 'real'... do you mean 'biological'?"

He didn't need to hear the answer. The surprise painted on the boy's face was enough for him.

"It's not the same?"

He had the impression that in a fraction of a second he had completed the full cycle of life, died and returned from the afterlife.

"My God..." He hid his face in hands. The relief was so limitless and overwhelming that for a moment he was absolutely sure that he would never be able to feel anything else again. The end. Done. His feelings had been completely reset, he didn't need any of them anymore, he didn't need to eat, he didn't need to sleep, he could live to be two hundred years with strength from just that moment and nothing else. And then he would die, happy and fulfilled.

"Phil?"

He felt someone tugging on his sleeve, and finally lifted his head to look at his son. His son.

*Ha! Fuck you, voice in the head! Never fucking again!*

He cupped the boy's face in his hands, bending down to bring their foreheads together.

"Kiddo," he sighed, still suspended somewhere between laughing and crying, "you can't even imagine how you scared me."

Wilbur pulled out of his embrace, confused and perhaps even a little scared by such a sudden change.

"I don't understand..." he muttered, and it was only this that made Phil realize that he was actually acting a bit irrational.

Or maybe even more than 'a bit'.

"I was just thinking..." He hesitated, not really knowing how to put into words all his thoughts and fears from the last dozen or so days and not completely overwhelm the boy with them. "When I say 'real' I mean... More, like, emotionally. Not biologically." He looked Wilbur straight in the eye. "Someone you really, really love."

For a few seconds the boy just stared at him, frowning and clearly analyzing something. Then his eyes widened, and his face was frozen in utter horror.

"You thought I didn't love you anymore?!"

On the first impulse, Phil wanted to deny it, to reassure him at least a little. And maybe he would even have done it if, firstly, he could, and secondly, he hadn't just gotten hit in the face with a lesson about honest conversations and their fucking great importance.

"You could put it that way."

"Oh." Wilbur's eyes instantly moistened, his chin quivered, and he reached out, hugging Phil so tightly that he gasped. "Oooh, Phiiii! I'm sorry!"

Phil laughed, because although his son's tears would usually crush his heart, this time he could only focus on having him in his arms. Safe and sound. His.

"It's okay," he assured, pulling the boy onto his lap when he showed no sign of wanting to let go of him anytime soon, even for a second. "It's just a misunderstanding."

"But it's so sad you thought so. I would cry."

*Not only you...*

"I guess everyone would cry a little."

"You can tell me when you are sad! Always!" The boy snuggled into him even tighter, and Phil was getting ready to nod, completely automatically and without thinking, when he suddenly realized that he shouldn't, not like that. He shouldn't dismiss Wilbur's words and completely forget them three seconds later, if not because it was just unfair on his part, then because the boy was absolutely right.

Communication in their home worked in one way. The children talked. Phil listened. Never the other way around. He never tried to ask, never tried to drill down, assuming that if any of the boys needed help, they would ask for it themselves. He expected the two traumatized kids to guess his intentions flawlessly, to sort out their own emotions and report to him at the end of the day, when they knew what they wanted and needed. As if they were preparing a shopping list. Or even as if they were his clients and sending him guidelines for work. That was worse! Most of his clients didn't know what they wanted and needed! And he was more willing to help them than his own children!

There was a huge, significant difference between giving someone time and respecting privacy, and avoiding difficult topics and hoping that no one else would touch them. In hindsight, Phil could name a few moments when he had rightly not tried to push and let Wilbur himself do what he needed given how each of his emotions worked. But he could also point to a million situations where he just chickened out. When he just didn't want to know. When he chose his own peace of mind and a dream undisturbed by the awareness of how nightmarish things people were capable of. He remembered standing outside Wilbur's door,

hearing his soft, muffled cry when everything inside him shouting that he should do something, anything, but he couldn't bring himself to push at the handle.

He never really opened that door. In fact, it was Wilbur who came out to him.

He had to change that. If not for the sake of the children, then at least for his own mental health. They had to start talking. He finally had to find a healthy balance between giving space and support.

Because Techno, apparently, had no intention of leaving the room of his own free will. And Phil was no longer going to stand by and lose him before he even managed to have him. Not after he nearly lost Wilbur.

"I never doubted it," he assured, drawing the boy closer to him.

Maybe this was the purpose of it all. Maybe he had to go through all this emotional hell to finally understand the absolute basics. All the sleepless nights, weeks of stress, hours spent blaming himself while trying to justify his own ineptitude - he could have avoided it all if he had only talked to his own child! If he'd taken a minute to ask Wilbur directly what he meant, he'd have half the gray hair less now and maybe he'd be able to meet Darryl's eyes again sometime.

*Goddamn it, Phil, you're an adult! Time to get it right before you accidentally hurt these kids! Or worse - before they follow your example!*

"Phil?" Wilbur's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. He looked down at the boy resting his chin on his chest. His cheeks were wet and his tears were glassy and red, but he didn't look sad. Very agitated and definitely experiencing great emotions, but not sad. "You've been very tired lately, haven't you?"

He hadn't expected to be put to the test so soon. Apparently a man could no longer calmly make a promise to himself that someone would not try to hold him accountable for.

He sighed heavily, and in case some higher being was already waiting around the corner to repeat the lessons of life, he answered honestly:

"I have."

He felt the boy's hands tighten on his shirt.

"But you won't send us back, will you?"

"Of course not." On that one point, he didn't even need all of his newfound knowledge - the answer always was and always would be the same. "Why would I do that?"

Wilbur hid his face in his shoulder again.

"I don't know." He sniffed loudly. "Thought it was my fault. 'Cause I make fun of you sometimes and maybe it made you sad. And I'm loud. And Techno doesn't want to talk to you."

Okay. That last point was a very unexpected dose of factual pain. Indeed, the truth speaks through the mouths of children. Mostly the ugly and brutal one.

"I like it when you're loud. And you know I always laugh at your jokes." He hesitated, but made himself heavy-heartedly add: "And Techno has every right not to trust me. I didn't quite give him reasons to change his mind."

"You tried," Wilbur said, with all his childlike understanding. It would have been nice to believe that he was right. Phil would have still believed he was right half an hour ago.

"I tried. But sometimes it doesn't matter that you try, because you just do it wrong from the beginning. As if you were trying to eat soup with a fork. You can try very hard, but it won't work, and it's no reason to be proud that you haven't given up, because you should have understood long ago that this is the wrong way."

Wilbur stepped back a little so he could look at him.

"Are we still talking about Techno?" He made sure, making such a funny face Phil couldn't help squeezing his cheeks and kissing his forehead. He missed this. Not so much the closeness as it was the awareness that he had a right to it.

"Mhm." He ruffled his dark hair, ignoring the murmur of discontent. "I'm sorry you had to worry about me."

"Puffy says not to say that." As usual, when he was quoting his therapist, the boy made a very serious face. After all, he was saying very serious things. "Don't say 'sorry', when you can say 'thank you'."

"Oh. Okay. So... Thank you for taking care of me."

It was difficult to judge whether Wilbur was more pleased with his choice of words, or that the adult was taking him seriously and actually taking his advice.

"Better. And you're welcome."

It was, in fact, better. It was much, much better. Phil hadn't felt this well in weeks, he hardly remembered the last time he was so calm, quiet, and focused only on one particular thing. He felt as if he had run an emotional marathon and only now could he finally stop for a while and really breathe, really relax and allow himself a moment of rest.

For only a brief moment though, as just as he was getting used to the general bliss, Wilbur suddenly lifted his head and shifted back, looking at him with sudden curiosity.

"Phil?" His lips twitched and oh, Phil already knew what was coming, he knew where it was going, and he definitely didn't like that. "Where did you hear me say something like that?"

He looked away.

"By accident..." he muttered, trying to mask his shame with a grunt.

Naturally, the boy was never fooled for a second.

"You were eavesdropping," he said. His eyes lit up.

"Accidentally."

"You were eavesdropping!" He repeated, his face lit up with a broad smile that heralded the end of the nice, polite child era and the return of the little gremlin. "And you always say it's such a bad thing... You're breaking your own rules, Phil! I'll tell everyone!"

He slipped out of his embrace and jumped off the bed. Phil jumped up right after him, but by some miracle, before he could take a step, the kid had already reached the door and ran out into the corridor, laughing and clearly planning to fulfill the threat. Old age had serious disadvantages: not only was Phil closer to death every day, but he also almost shortened this distance by slipping and barely making a turn.

"Nope!" He finally managed to get his victim right by the stairs and immediately grabbed the boy by the waist and turned him upside down. "You won't tell anyone."

Wilbur laughed even louder, kicking his feet to the point that Phil needed both hands to make sure he didn't accidentally drop him.

"I'll tell everyone! And no one will listen to you anymore!"

"Oh, because you're listening to me now?"

Somewhere down the hall a door cracked open and Techno hesitantly stuck his head out of the room. Phil froze, one hand still holding Wilbur by the waist, the other trying to tickle him to death without being kicked straight on the nose.

Oh. Yeah. Techno.

As bad as it might sound, he forgot for a moment that he also had a second child at home, who was not necessarily used to the fact that someone could be running around the house and make a lot of noise. Or maybe he was just too used to it. In a context that Phil definitely preferred not to-

No. Stop. He would think about it. He would give it due attention, analyze it and draw all possible conclusions as he should have from the very beginning. And if it made him a little less calm and a little closer to murdering humanity, that was just his problem.

"Hey kid," he smiled, trying to sound casual, but Techno didn't pay attention to him at all. Instead, he stared at Wilbur, clearly looking for any sign that something was wrong.

"All right?" he made sure when he found no evidence.

Wilbur nodded, which looked a bit comical given his current position.

"Yup!"



"Oh." Techno's face softened, but as he looked at Phil, he tensed again and frowned. "Okay."

He backed into the room, closing the door behind him. Then he opened it almost the full width again and slammed it shut so hard that it jumped off the frame and he had to slam it shut a second time.

Phil seriously wondered if there were any speed bumps that could be used for a door. The only thing that kept him from checking thoroughly was that then Techno would surely find himself a new, perhaps even more destructive hobby. The constant cracking sound wasn't the worst possible thing, after all. Tough but harmless, until nobody's fingers were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I think you have a knight." He set Wilbur carefully to the floor, heading in the right direction, hoping with great hope that the boy couldn't see how quickly one brief interaction had drained him of his newly regained zest for life and energy.

He guessed he was actually a better actor than he had assumed, because Wilbur didn't look a bit worried that if Techno continued, they would probably have to replace the lock in a month.

"I told you he likes me." He straightened, raising his head proudly. "I'm too cute to dislike me."

Phil would love to be able to say the same for himself.

# Chapter 25

## Chapter Notes

YOOOOO, @SylviaoftheDepths helped me with this chapter, BIG POG!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur didn't stray from him for the rest of the day. He walked after him like a shadow, taking absolutely every opportunity to cling to his shoulder and starting to talk about completely random stuff as soon as he thought Phil got lost in his mind. If anyone else had done the same under any other circumstances, it would have become irritating within minutes, but the boy was so sincere in his concern and so committed to proving his love that even three hours later, it was impossible to respond with anything except with affection. Phil couldn't, at least. Because Techno, apparently, had a different opinion on this.

It was hard to judge what exactly was upsetting him about Wilbur's behavior. Perhaps he felt rejected and ignored. Perhaps he didn't fully understand what was happening and preemptively assumed it was nothing good. Or perhaps, like most people, he just couldn't stand it when someone else was happier than him. In any case, whatever the cause - he was absolutely unbearable.

Phil really tried not to think that way. He tried to understand, remember and keep his emotions in check, not letting the child know how much he felt like yelling at him at times just to make him feel what it was like to be treated like this. Even though he thought maybe then he would have gained some respect.

He had never done so and never planned to, not really, not except for the purely hypothetical scenarios that he played in his mind over and over again, drawing a satisfaction he would most likely be ashamed of for the rest of his life. Because Techno already knew very well what it was like to be treated that way, he *was* treated that way for most of his life, by people who tried by force to gain his respect and make him obey.

But even knowing all of this, even trying his best to remain the best version of himself and not let fatigue and frustration take over his mind, Phil would lose at times.

He just wanted a nice, quiet evening. One nice evening, nothing else. He wanted to sit in the living room, replying to e-mails on his laptop, while Wilbur permanently taped together two completely mismatched puzzles because they "looked good together", and Techno fell asleep on the couch watching cartoons. But everything was fine as it was now. Maybe just a little too loud for his liking.

"Could you turn the TV down?" He asked, and the boy immediately reached for the remote and turned up the volume.

The specter of an impending migraine loomed on the horizon.

"Techno, I asked for something." Nothing. "Techno, if you don't turn down the volume, I'll turn it off."

There was no answer, so after a few seconds of vain hope for a peaceful solution, he reluctantly got up from the table.

Techno was just waiting for it, immediately moving to the farthest corner of the couch, hiding the remote control behind his back and staring defiantly at the man. As if Phil had the urge, time and energy to struggle with him and try to take anything away from him when he could just take two more steps and unplug the TV.

"I warned you," he reminded him when there was finally a blissful silence in the room.

He didn't even have time to sit down, Techno slipping past him and immediately seizing the opportunity of his short-lived freedom. The TV screen lit up again, and Phil had to hold his breath for a good three seconds to keep at least a semblance of his composure.

Wilbur, meanwhile, looked up, forgetting his super-important project, and frowned.

"Can you stop?" He turned to the other boy, his voice evidently irritated. Which was all the more surprising as he usually either dismissed or turned into a joke all the harassment he witnessed and was ordinarily just a bastion of optimism and understanding.

Techno was probably a bit baffled with this change as well, but he quickly returned to his usual role.

"Piss off," he snorted, then flinched as Wilbur hit the table with a puzzle box.

"No!" He took another swing, this time clearly aiming at the most alive object possible, and Phil quickly dashed towards it, taking the cardboard from him. "You gotta stop!"

"Wilbur." Not really knowing how to react, he placed his hands on the boy's shoulders, turning him to his side and trying to catch his gaze. "Calm down. Nothing is happening."

"But tell him to stop!"

"Techno did nothing-"

"He did!" Wilbur jerked violently, tearing himself out of his embrace and nearly falling off the chair. At the last moment, he managed to hold onto the tabletop before gravity took over. "He's trying to get you to do something to him! So he can say he was right!"

Damn it. Phil didn't want to hear that. He didn't want to hear it from Wilbur. Not because he didn't see something so obvious, or because he was still trying to deny the facts - but he still hoped he could keep his son away from all the conflict. He didn't want his relationship with Techno to affect how the boys perceived each other, he didn't want to destroy this strange, not entirely understood bond that was growing between them.

Deep down, he knew he was trying for nothing. Of course Wilbur knew. Of course he had guessed Techno's intentions a lot sooner than he did. Of course he understood - because not so long ago he himself was in his place, and even if he reacted differently and made different decisions, the emotions were still the same.

No matter how many times he had experienced it, it was always painful to think how much of his son's natural innocence and childish naivety had already been lost. How much had been taken from him.

"Wilbur." He didn't try to touch him again, instead waiting patiently for the boy to look at him himself.

"But he-!"

"I know. But calm down." He smiled as the child finally turned to him, still trembling with too much emotion. "It's fine. Don't panic."

The boy looked away, his lips pressed tightly together, his hands still trembling and his knuckles turning white as his fingers tightened on his own arms. But he didn't pull away either as Phil carefully brushed his bangs out of his eyes, which was definitely a good sign.

Phil could clearly hear the quick footsteps on the stairs and the creaking of an upstairs door, but temporarily relegated the thought to a side plan. As cruel and unfair as it sounded, and he always felt guilty about it, Wilbur was his top priority, no matter what. He believed that one day that would change. That he would be able to honestly say that both boys were equally important to him and he loved both unconditionally. One day. But not now.

"Come on, breathe slowly, okay?"

Three loud, deep breaths later, Wilbur's arms finally relaxed a bit, and he leaned heavily against the back of his chair.

"Sorry," he muttered, and this time he allowed himself to be embraced, closing his eyes as Phil whispered that nothing had happened.

"I'll go check on Techno, okay?"

He didn't really want to leave his son alone, but every second Techno now spent alone was a very clear message to him that he wasn't being treated equally. And even if Phil couldn't avoid it completely - even if it was the harsh truth in part - he decided at least to keep the damage to an absolute minimum.

There was no sound, not even the faintest noise, coming from behind the door as he gathered himself to knock.

"Techno? Can I come in?"

A few seconds passed, but he finally got a reply, which was quite a success in itself. Even if the boy's tone left a lot to be desired.

"For what?"

"I just want to talk."

Another moment of silence. He was getting ready to suffer a minor blow to his pride and try the technique of having a conversation through a piece of wood, when suddenly on the other side he heard the shuffling of moving furniture, light footsteps along panels, and then a much less confident voice than before.

"Okay. If you must..."

To be honest, he hadn't expected this outcome and was more than suspicious. The boy had already proved that he could be unpredictable and he was surprising him at every step, usually in a not very positive way. Nevertheless, he tried to be optimistic and focus on the bright sides. Like the right side of the door he'd finally come to.

With the blinds closed, the room was lit only by the glow of the bedside lamp on the table next to the bed. In its light, Techno's face seemed even more sinister, his eyes seemed to try to pierce his uninvited guest right through, reach deep for his soul and tear it out by the roots, though his knees were pulled up high under his chin, his tense muscles showed that he was ready to escape every second and at the slightest cue. Only his bare arms beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his blouse made the whole angry demeanor look very sad.

"Hi." Phil stepped closer, still trying to keep a safe distance, feeling the suspicious gaze on himself too clearly. He didn't even try to approach the bed, pointing instead to the chair by the desk. "Can I sit?"

Techno frowned.

"This is *your* house," he grunted, wrapping his arms around his legs. "It doesn't fucking matter what I say."

Phil's heart squeezed painfully. Out of compassion and concern, but also at the thought that he himself was part of the problem. He didn't really try to let the child know that he was welcome here. He was too busy with the problem of tolerating him. And yes, the fact that Techno was deliberately pissing him off and very consciously trying to upset him was somewhat of an explanation, but it wasn't an excuse. What the hell was he expecting? He read his file, read different opinions on him, talked to him and experienced firsthand how introverted the boy was. He decided to take care of him, knowing how difficult it could be. He had no right to be surprised now and pretend to be a victim.

"It's also your home and your room, and I'm always interested in your opinion," he assured him, because although the words didn't matter much, not to Techno, he should still have said them. A long time ago. "And don't worry. Wilbur's angry now, but he'll get over it quickly. He just can't be angry for a long time."

Techno rested his forehead on knees, hiding his face behind always disheveled hair. In the pale light, its color was much less bright, and it really suited him. With a bit of luck, in some time he might be persuaded to visit a hairdresser.

"I don't care."

Of course. If Phil got a pound every time he heard this... he still wouldn't be a millionaire, unfortunately. But at least he would buy himself some good sedatives.

"I think you do," he replied, knowing he might as well have stabbed a bear with a stick. So he wasn't surprised when Techno lifted his head to look at him with all the accumulation of anger he had in him. And there was a lot of it.

"You think you're so goddamn smart, huh?" He growled, and it might have sounded a little scary if he had a few dozen centimeters more and at least a little muscle instead of the skin and bones he was now. But he had mastered his face and tone to perfection.

Phil leaned in, resting his elbows on thighs, keeping their faces level.

"I think you're scared and trying to deal with it somehow."

"I'm not scared! It's just... You're just pissing me off!"

Okay, contact made. Maybe not very friendly, but of the two bads, Phil really preferred it when the baby yelled at him to when he didn't say anything at all. In anger, it's much easier to say something that under normal circumstances would never have passed his throat, and in his situation, every piece of information was worth its weight in gold. He'd wasted weeks and was determined to make up for them as soon as possible.

"Why?"

It was obvious that Techno didn't sense the trick. If that were the case, he would have stepped back immediately, instead of letting his feelings take control, clenching his hands into fists, raising his voice and spitting out the words faster and faster.

"You pretend that everything is alright and that you care! I hate it when people do this! I hate when someone is lying!" He sprang to his feet as well, standing on the mattress so he could tower over the Phil and at least thus keep control of the situation. But he was still shaking to the point that he would most likely land on his back on the floor at the slightest touch. "Why did you take me at all? They didn't tell you what I am? They didn't tell you that I'm aggressive and stupid and that I destroy everything and that there was no chance that someone would want me?" His eyes flashed alarmingly, and though he rubbed them quickly with his sleeve, he was clearly unable to hold back the rising tears. Phil couldn't look at them. He couldn't listen to his words. He couldn't think about what exactly it was he was saying in order to not feel guilty about letting all these emotions prey on his child for so long. "They didn't tell you that I'm a hopeless case and would be in this damn system until they finally kick me out of it? They didn't tell you-"

In extreme desperation, Phil held out his hand, unsure what he was actually trying to do.

"Techno, calm down..."

"Or *what?! What are you gonna do?*"

The silence in the room was the loudest Phil had heard in his entire life.

Techno was panting, his hands trembling, his fist clenched tightly, his face pale, and though he was clearly trying to pretend to be brave, his eyes showed fear.

Phil looked at him, looked at the child who regularly drove him mad, at whom he sometimes wanted to scream out of sheer helplessness, the kid that deliberately annoyed him day in and day out - and for the first time he really understood.

It was so easy to love Wilbur, looking into his large, fearful eyes and seeing how he reacted with disbelief to every act of kindness. It was easy to show him affection and support as he made sure every step of the way that he hadn't done anything wrong. It was easy to get attached to this pile of misfortune and just want to do anything to make him happy. Because Wilbur was so innocent and hurt so deeply that it was impossible to pass by him indifferently, it was impossible to ignore his pain and still be able to look himself in the eyes in the mirror.

Techno was different. Stronger. Tougher. He attacked instead of running and scared people away instead of giving them a chance. He couldn't trust and had been hurt too many times to even understand that anyone might have good intentions towards him. He knew only one pattern of behavior, he only prepared for it, and if someone didn't immediately fit into it, he was ready to do anything to change that behavior and get back minimal control over his life.

And it wasn't his fault.

He was a terrified child, trying to protect himself the only way he knew. He was a little boy who didn't deserve any of the nightmarish, unimaginably cruel things that had happened to him, traces of which he would carry with him forever. He could be annoying, stubborn, and difficult because others had made him that way, but that in no way made him less worthy of compassion and love than Wilbur.

Techno deserved to be fought for. To try. To be loved.

Phil slowly withdrew his hand, never taking his eyes off the kid.

"I won't hurt you, Techno," he promised. He wanted so much for it to be as obvious to both of his boys as it was that water was wet and fire burned. So that they didn't even have to think about it, so that they *just knew*. "No matter what you do, I will never *ever* lay my hand on you. I know what you are trying to do. And I understand why, I think. You can keep trying as long as you like, but the answer will always be the same. I want to help you, Techno. I don't think you are a 'hopeless case'. Or that you are stupid or that you are intentionally trying to hurt anyone. I think you are a very smart, fucking scared boy."

Techno turned his head, hiding face behind hair again. It was hard to judge if the speech had made any impression on him, or if he just still hadn't cooled down from his tantrums, but something about the way his hands tightened at the edge of his sweatshirt, rather than shielding his shoulders as usual, gave him hope they had taken at least one small step towards a change for the better.

"You don't know shit about me," he muttered, but it didn't sound half as defiant as it did a moment ago. More like a very bitter statement of fact.

In a way, he was right. But Phil was willing to do anything to change that.

He smiled slightly, even if the boy couldn't see it.

"You're not as good at hiding as you think you are."

Techno didn't answer. Maybe he couldn't think of anything malicious enough, or maybe he was just afraid that if he tried to speak, he would cry. He certainly looked closer to the latter when he sat on the mattress with a flourish and reached for the plushie bear lying in the opposite corner of the bed, immediately wrapping all his limbs around him and hiding his face in the white fur. His arms were trembling and Phil had to put a lot of effort into stopping himself from hugging him. Not yet. For now, Steve had to do it.

"Do you want me to hang out with you?" He asked, though he knew the answer in advance and was not at all surprised when the boy shook his head. "Should I go?" Equally quick nod. "Okay. But you can come down to us at any time. Wilbur really doesn't know how to be angry for long. In fact, I'm sure he already feels sorry."

Techno sniffed.

"Go away..." he muttered into his plush face, and this time, perhaps for the first time, it sounded more like a request than an order.

Phil no longer had the heart to torture him, not when it was obvious how embarrassed he was and utterly unused to showing his 'weaknesses' to anyone. So he left the boy alone, not wanting to test the thin thread of understanding they had established.

As soon as he descended into the living room, Wilbur immediately jumped up from the couch and practically threw himself into his arms.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude to him. But it annoys me so much when he's like this..."

Phil hummed in understanding as he stroked his hair. Sometimes he missed times when he wasn't always tired and no one expected anything of him. He didn't want to go back to it, in retrospect, his old life seemed to him so bloody empty and boring. But at times he wished he could retain a bit of his former freedom.

"It's not his fault."

Wilbur nodded, taking a deep breath vibrating in his throat.

"I know. I know, 'cause in the beginning I also... I thought you'd be..." He gripped Phil's shirt tighter. "But that's not fair. You're not like that, Phil. And it bothers me when someone thinks that."

It wasn't like he didn't know how empathetic Wilbur was and how defensive he was becoming towards people he was beginning to care about. Or that the boy had never hinted



before that Phil was the first really positive figure in his life, and for that reason alone, he had been promoted to the greatest authority. But the last few weeks had been bloody tiring and had a heavy toll on his self-esteem, so every gesture of this kind, every positive reaction, seemed even more important than usual to him.

"Thank you," he replied through a lump in his throat, silently vowing to himself that he would do absolutely anything to never disappoint the confidence placed in him again.

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"Hey, Puffy," he sighed into the phone half an hour later as Wilbur dozed on the couch, his head in his lap. "This is Phil Watson. Yes, everything's fine, yhm. I was just wondering... Do you know any good therapists? For me?"

He was going to keep his word.

## Chapter End Notes

It's therapy time, baby! :D

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Notes

@SylviaoftheDepths is the reason, this chapter make sense.

Also! Thank you all for the comments! I can't find enough words to say how much I appreciate them and how happy they make me. I love this story myself, so it's such nice thing to know, others find it entertaining too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The boys didn't speak to each other for the entire morning. They passed each other without a word in the corridor, ate breakfast in silence, even the road to school passed in a tense, grave atmosphere, although the day was promising to be sunny, and the radio was streaming one of those songs, the words of which Wilbur knew by heart and never failed to prove on every occasion it came on. But now the boy seemed much more interested in pretending that they hadn't been using the same route twice every day of the school year, and the view outside the window had become something new and exciting overnight. Techno was practically pressing sideways against the second door, staring at his own hands, twisting his fingers at angles where human fingers should definitely not bend. When they accidentally glanced at each other at the same time, they immediately looked away, but neither of them looked angry or offended, rather ashamed. Apparently, the night before had resulted in a little more than the therapist's number, which Phil hurriedly wrote down on a piece of paper and pinned it over his desk.

He suspected that if he let them deal with it on their own, they would get over it sooner or later, like most kids did with most things. But the last time he tried to wait out negative emotions resulted in a nervous breakdown, so nobody could blame him for being a bit oversensitive on this point. He was going to do something about it, and he was going to do it quickly.

When, a few hours later, the boys threw their backpacks in the trunk and crashed into the back seats, Phil leaned out of the driver's seat to hand them a paper bag of chips and burgers.

"Here. Dinner will be a little later, so you'd better stock up. We're going on a trip."

Wilbur, already halfway through a bag of fries, beamed immediately, but Techno seemed a lot less enthusiastic.

"Me too?" He asked, and it was hard to judge if he was counting on being allowed to stay in the car or afraid of being locked up alone.

Phil glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

"You too," he confirmed. "I'm absolutely sure that if you don't start coming out into the light, you'll grow vampire teeth and start crying out for blood. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get off the carpet?"

Wilbur leaned out to be able to look at him through the gap between the seats.

"How do *you* know that, Phil?" He asked, trying to look scared, but his cheeks were stuffed with burger and he had mayonnaise at the corner of his mouth, so he wasn't particularly convincing.

Still, Phil winked at him, putting a finger to his lips.

"Shhh. You don't wanna know."

While on weekends the shore of the lake often resembled a market place, full of families with small children trying to close their eyes for a moment and pretend that they weren't in the middle of the city and they couldn't hear the noise of the street breaking through the narrow strip of trees, the beach was usually deserted during the week. Phil breathed a sigh of relief to see that they weren't the only ones who decided to take advantage of probably the last days of real summer. It wasn't crowded, just a couple of teenagers sitting on a fallen tree trunk and a family with a little, maybe three-year-old girl, but it was enough for Techno to relax a bit and his steps to gain more confidence. Unlike Wilbur, who at first disliked the presence of strangers, Techno clearly felt more at ease with the thought that he had someone to seek help from in case of any problems. His reasoning was very simple: adults were much less willing to hurt him in front of witnesses, so every extra pair of eyes nearby was a guarantee of safety.

Phil tried to remember not to take it personally.

"Do you know how to skip a stone?" He turned to the boy, and without waiting for an answer, bent down to dig a few pebbles of a suitable shape from the sand.

Wilbur immediately perked up.

"I do!" Without waiting for any answer, he ran towards the trees, probably to find enough ammunition.

Phil rolled his eyes.

"Of course he does. I taught him." He glanced at Techno and smiled encouragingly, holding out an open hand with a few pebbles still caked with damp sand. "Want to try too?"

The boy hesitated, stared at his hand for a few seconds, as if trying to calculate how close he could allow himself to come, then closed the distance between them in one leap and immediately returned to his previous spot as soon as he had managed to grab a few stones. He twisted one of them in his fingers, frowning.

"What should I do?"

"You have to... Wait, I'll show you."

Phil stepped back a little so as not to scare him again and, taking a wide swing, hurled the stone towards the water. The piece of rock bounced off the surface three times before it disappeared for good.

Phil grimaced, dissatisfied with the effect.

"I'm out of practice," he said regretfully. "I used to know how to throw it to make it bounce seven times!"

"That's bullshit." Wilbur appeared literally out of nowhere next to him, and as predicted, all possible pockets were stuffed with stones. "Five were the most. I was counting."

"I used to skip stones before you were born, kid."

The boy shrugged.

"If I haven't seen something, it hasn't happened. Techno?" He looked at the other boy and Phil immediately stepped back so they could look at each other directly.

They both seemed confused, Wilbur twirling the toe of his shoe around a hole in the ground, Techno trying to break his fingers again. For a whole minute they just stood in silence, broken only by the sound of the water, the crunching sand and the distant voices of other people. And then, quite suddenly, the atmosphere relaxed, though neither of them said anything. It was enough for them to look at each other and Techno's face instantly softened, and Wilbur's lips stretched into a broad smile.

"Here." He pulled a handful of stones out of his pocket.

Phil watched the glistening rocks pass from one hand to the other and tried not to breathe too loudly so as not to accidentally spoil the moment with his mere presence. It was only when Techno took a strong swing and threw the stone into the water with full force that he allowed himself to laugh.

"No, not like that. More like..." He crouched down so the boy could see him better, and showed his hand movement once more. "It has to hit the water at the right angle."

"As if you'd like it to slide," added Wilbur, following his own advice himself and smiling proudly as the pebble bounced four times. "Like that."

Techno frowned and nodded, clearly taking the game very seriously. Much more seriously than necessary, if Phil was to be honest. Especially a few minutes and several failed attempts later.

"Hey, hey, take it easy!" he admonished when at least five stones landed in the water at once, and none of them was evidently thrown for any fun. With each successive sinking, Techno's face tightened more and more, his eyes took on an unpleasant, harsh expression, and he began to look less like a child playing, and more like a frustrated worker on a deadline and at the verge of losing all strength. Phil knew what he was talking about. He saw this face in the mirror every two months on average. "You won't get it far like that."

He quickly realized that he had chosen the wrong words, because the boy immediately fell all the way upset.

"I *can* do it," he growled, throwing stones at a time, but as he glanced at Phil between each swings, there was a hint of fear in his eyes.

Bad sign. A very bad sign. Phil had no idea what had gone wrong or at what point, but he knew he needed to find it quickly and nip fears in the bud. He glanced at Wilbur, silently praying that the boy would pick up on his silent message. The kid frowned, not understanding at first, but then he glanced at Techno and it was obvious that he had connected the right dots.

"I'm going to build a fort," he said, carefully setting the rest of his precious ammunition on the sand. Phil watched him go until he disappeared into the nearby trees, then immediately focused his full attention on his other child.

"Of course you can do it," he assured him, watching the boy pursed his lips and looked away. "I'm sure if you practice a little, you'll be very good at it. But if not, then nothing will happen. It's just for fun." He smiled and picking up a pebble from the sand with one move sent it towards the other shore. And if he deliberately threw it only to bounce once, no one needed to know. "It's meant to please you, not make you angry."

Techno didn't seem convinced. To tell the truth, he looked like he didn't understand anything he'd just heard. As if he didn't understand the very concept of doing something he wasn't immediately good at and not accepting it as a failure in life.

He threw the rest of the stones to the ground and sat down, instantly drawing his knees up to his chin.

"I'm not stupid," he muttered, as if trying to fight off an attack that never happened.

Phil hesitated, but eventually sat down next to him, far enough away that it would not arouse him into alertness, but also close enough to lower his voice a little.

"I never said you were," he assured him, waiting for the boy to meet his eyes. He only got a brief, unfriendly glance, but he still counted it as progress. "I think you're a goddamn smart kid."

Techno snorted loudly.

"Yeah. Because you haven't seen me fail school yet."

Oh. Okay, guess he was starting to see where they were going.

"I didn't mean school. Though I think you just lack motivation anyway."

The boy grimaced, starting to push his fingers through the sand, scooping it up into a small pile, which he then crushed with one blow of his open hand.

"My previous family gave me a hell of motivation."

Phil was absolutely convinced that it would not lead to anything good, but he couldn't help but be naive to ask:

"Really?"

"Yeah. By beating the shit out of me."

*Well, so much for his education.*

Phil would like to say he was surprised, but he only felt painfully confirmed in his assumptions. Apparently the time had come for more promises which Techno would consider as empty as all the previous ones.

"Lest there be any doubts: I don't use those kinds of punishments. To be honest, I generally don't consider violence as a viable method for anything."

He could almost feel the boy's muscles tense, and his hand tightened on the lump of sand.

"I've heard that already, too. You can call it 'disciplining' or 'teaching a lesson' or whatever you like." He threw the sand in front of him. "But it still hurts just the same."

Phil watched as some of the sand fell to the water, then disappeared slowly. He should have been prepared for it. After all the long, painful conversations with Wilbur, he really should have had thick skin and been able to accept such a confession without thinking of genocide. And yet, he still couldn't. And he didn't think he would ever be. He would feel like a bad person if he could hear about a child being hurt without even a little bit of emotion. Even if a lot of them were bent on murdering absolutely anyone who ever dared hurt his boy.

"Techno..." He had no idea what words to use, so in the end he just decided to be honest. "I'm really sorry that this happened to you." And honestly, if I were you, I wouldn't trust a stranger who makes a lot of promises either. But I don't want to hurt you. I want to help you. And I really think you're damn smart." He paused for a moment, waiting for any reply, and when he didn't get any, he added, "I don't think I should say that, but you impressed me."

It finally got some reaction - Techno scowled at him.

"What?"

"Your escape attempt was really well thought out. I don't know if I could plan it that well. Though I still don't know where you wanted to get the tent from, but I guess I'd rather not ask."

The boy started picking from the sand again. His fingers found one of the pebbles he had left behind and immediately squeezed it tightly.

"What made you suspicious?"

"Backpack." Techno grimaced, clearly dissatisfied with himself, then tossed the stone. Phil immediately offered him another. "You have to throw a little more off your wrist." He instructed, pointing to the right move, and to his surprise the boy really took the advice.

Another stone hit the surface of the lake, and this time it bounced off it before it splashed to the bottom. "Yes, exactly!" He smiled broadly. "See? My stupid advice can be useful."

The corners of the Techno's mouth twitched slightly, and though it was hard to call it a real smile, it was still the closest Phil had ever seen.

"You can be useful too," he muttered suddenly, not looking in his direction. "And I'm sorry I was annoying. Like, on purpose."

Phil felt his heart surge in relief. Mainly at the thought that he might finally be able to survive the day and never hear the upstairs door collide with the door frame.

"Does that mean you won't be anymore?"

Shrug of the shoulders.

"I'm bored of that."

Oh, let all gods be blessed forever...!

He didn't have time to answer, because at the same moment several dozen kilograms of live weight jumped on his back and he had to prop himself up with his hands so as not to hit the sand with his nose.

"Are you done?" Wilbur was breathing hard, which clearly didn't mean he was out of energy.

Phil reached an arm behind him so he could grab him and pull him to his lap.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. How's your fort?"

"It collapsed."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Eh, nevermind. Dream has a better one anyway. We're gonna steal it." He paused for a moment, letting Phil rest his head against the top of his head. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, softer, and almost nostalgic. "I like it when you take me to the lake."

Phil closed his eyes, taking a deep, cleansing breath.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yhm. I like the lake in general. Do you want to know why?"

Phil didn't want to. He definitely didn't want to, because he knew perfectly well what was going on and where this conversation was leading. Even so, being a good father with no backbone at all, he asked:

"Why?"

Wilbur tilted his head to look at him. His face was indifferent, but his eyes gleamed with determination.

"There are fish in the lake," he said in a flat, unemotional tone. "And I like fish a lot, Phil."

"I know."

"Do you know where else a fish could live? One little fish?"

Phil closed his eyes, sighing heavily.

"In your room?"

"In my room."

Shit. Sometimes he didn't believe he was so easy to manipulate. Especially for a ten-year-old.

"Okay." He raised his hands in a gesture of submission. "Okay, you won. Let it be. I'll buy you that damn fish."

Wilbur smiled in a way that invariably made Phil want to exorcise him. Unfortunately, he didn't even have time to make a sign of the cross before it reached him somewhere from the side:

"You're weak, Phil."

"Oh, really?" He turned to Techno, trying to look indignant. "Said the one who was afraid of a bit of fresh air. Well, didn't the sun kill you?"

"Unfortunately not."

"Oh, thank god. The transformation stopped in time! We won't have to make blood sacrifices!"

Wilbur laughed out loud.

"Blood for the Blood God!"

"Shut up." Techno rolled his eyes, although it was obvious that he liked the new title quite well.

Phil just hoped they wouldn't use it in school. But even if they did - it was worth it. The three of them had never spent such a normal afternoon before. They had never talked so calmly, had never joked so freely, making the atmosphere almost... family-like. He wanted to keep this moment for longer. He wanted to spend days, weeks just sitting in the sun and watching his boys run on the beach, teasing each other and acting exactly as kids should, happy and confident that they were safe.

He couldn't, however. He couldn't, unfortunately, just stop time. But he could make sure there were more days like this.



And that was what he planned to focus on.

## Chapter End Notes

I am so disappointed that "puszczać kaczki" is "skip a stone" in English. The Polish name literally means "release the ducks" and I had to cut the whole joke where Techno was shocked that they would throw rocks at the ducks.

## Chapter 27

Things finally turned in the right direction.

It wasn't a sudden, spectacular twist, rather a slow, cautious exit on the Doomsday highway, but with each passing day Phil could see more and more clearly that the atmosphere in the house was finally starting to change. It was much calmer, no door slamming all the time, no screaming, no throwing anything at all, but definitely not quieter, with constant banter, the sound of the computer games, and the occasional 'Phiiil, tell him now my turn now!' hitting from somewhere upstairs.

It was difficult to judge how secure and safe Techno actually felt. He certainly still didn't believe it was going to last forever, but he seemed reconciled to the idea that for a time he was doomed to tolerate their presence in his life. Phil expected nothing more, not at this stage, and made no attempt to push. Still, he tried to make it clear as much as possible that he was not planning any major changes, especially when it comes to the number of household members.

"You're good at this," he said quite honestly as Techno helped him prepare the garden for the coming fall. He volunteered for this job and just for that he deserved praise, but it also quickly turned out that he actually knows what he's doing. "Have you tended the garden before?"

Techno pursed his lips, thrusting the paddle into the ground a little too abruptly, but when he spoke a moment later, there was no anger in his voice, just an overwhelming sadness.

"Once, in one house. But not long."

Phil nodded, giving the boy a moment in case he wanted to elaborate on the subject, but not trying to ask for details himself. He might still have trouble learning from his mistakes, but some things were obvious even to him.

"We're not likely to have much work to do now, but I'll definitely need your help in the spring," he said as the silence stretched and it became obvious that he was in charge with keeping the conversation going. "I have two left hands for this, and Wilbur... Don't tell him, but he's definitely better at devastating a garden with his friends than at caring for it."

"I heard that!" They heard from somewhere behind their backs. Wilbur appeared in the patio door only to make a face at Phil and put on the ground a tray of coffee, juice, and a plate of lopsided sandwiches that he was supposed to bring half an hour ago, but had obviously forgotten.

Phil laughed at his dramatic tone.

"You know I love you anyway!" He managed to call before the door closed behind the boy, and then cursed in his thoughts at his own thoughtlessness, glancing hastily at his other child.

Should he behave like this in his presence? Damn, he never thought about it. Yes, he was tender to Wilbur at almost every turn, but direct confessions were different from mere closeness. More explicit and harder to ignore. Techno was definitely not ready to hear these words yet (and Phil, though reluctant to admit it, wasn't ready to say them yet), but that didn't mean he wouldn't be sad or jealous.

When he looked at the boy, the first option seemed very likely. His eyebrows were narrowed, his eyes focused on something only he could see, and his hands lay flat on a lump of dirt, as if he had momentarily forgotten what he had planned to do with them.

"Do you really think I'll still be here in the spring?" He asked suddenly, much quieter and less confident than usual, and Phil had a moment's difficulty matching the subjects.

Oh. Oh, okay, so he didn't destroy anything, thank gods. In fact, he just got a chance to clear up a few things.

"Are you planning another bivouac?" He asked, crouching next to the boy, a little closer than usual. Pleasantly noting that he neither flinched nor did anything to increase the distance.

Techno rolled his eyes.

"No," he grunted, concentrating once more on digging into the ground, perhaps more for the sheer joy of getting dirty than for any specific purpose. "You'd find me right away and drag me back anyway."

"I wouldn't put it in such a brutal way, but yes, I would," he admitted. "So it looks like you have no choice but to become our little gardener. What a terrible fate, really."

He could clearly see the boy's lips twitch, but he immediately suppressed a smile, keeping his face blank.

"It's child slavery, you know that?"

"I do, Wilbur says it every time he has to help me clean up. You can start unions and write a formal complaint, I will be very happy to ignore it."

This time there was no doubt - although he was clearly trying hard to hold back, Techno chuckled. Then he tensed and glanced quickly at Phil as if he really expected to be scolded for it.

"I wasn't laughing at you," he assured quickly, which on the one hand was damned disturbing, on the other hand terribly sad, and as a whole required immediate correction and change.

"I know, take it easy," he said, pretending not to see how stressed the boy was. He didn't want to embarrass him by pointing out something that wasn't his fault in any way. "And even if so, Wilbur does it all the time, I'm used to it. In his defense, sometimes I really do stupid things."

He looked down at the two pairs of hands covered with dirt. A year ago, perhaps even on the same bed, he had tried to assure Wilbur that he didn't need to be afraid to open up to him and

show his emotions. Not everything turned out exactly as he wanted to, he tried to do too many things at once and probably only scared the child even more as a result. Therefore, this time he didn't try to cross another barrier by making physical contact and repeating the same slogans over and over again, unknowingly putting pressure on him. Instead, he allowed the boy's shoulders to slowly relax, his breathing slow, and the silence added all that the words couldn't.

That evening, when Techno went downstairs to watch a movie with them, for the first time Steve was resting on his lap, not beside him, like a shield separating him from the rest of the world.

Little steps, one by one...

\* \* \*

Everything seemed to be going well. Techno started to smile, mostly with Wilbur, but it was still a huge success under the circumstances. He started acting louder too, not to make anyone angry, but in the "I feel at ease enough to complain when you tell me to go to sleep" way that made Phil's heart soften and regain faith that maybe he's not the worst father in the world after all. Cruel and mean one, because he had the nerve to send two ten-year-olds to bed after nine p.m. in the middle of the week, but not the worst.

Therefore, he hadn't expected that he would pick up the phone on Wednesday morning and have to go to pick up his older child from school a few hours earlier than planned. He had it at the very end of his "to-do" list, to be honest.

Techno sat scowling on one of the chairs in the corridor, declaring war on the world with all his posture, but as soon as he saw Phil, he immediately turned his head, pursed his lips and made it obvious that he had nothing to say. Unlike the school principal. Phil was absolutely sure he should feel embarrassed hearing about how the boy not only repeatedly refused to obey orders but also called his teacher names in PE, but, frankly, his main reaction was, "Ah, yes, sounds totally like something Techno would do." Not that he said it aloud. Unlike his child, he knew how to keep his mouth shut.

He had no idea what to do. He had no experience with this. Yes, Wilbur did get into trouble, and the teachers sometimes complained that he wasn't paying attention in class, but nothing more. He certainly hadn't called anyone an "old cunt" in front of the rest of the class. And even if he did, he never got caught up.

Maybe this was the main difference. If Wilbur did something like that, Phil would be bloody angry and disappointed, because even if the boy had his faults and made minor stumbles, he

was definitely capable of much better behavior. Techno... Damn. Phil felt terrible with the thought that a lot of his lack of emotion was due to the fact that he had never expected anything better of him. In his heart he was surprised that he hadn't received a call from school the very first day the child had crossed the threshold.

He believed that Techno had great potential and with a little help and a lot of good will, he would finally be able to use it. That, if only he was given the right conditions for it, if he finally felt confident and safe and didn't have to focus on survival, he would be able to prove to everyone that he really was a goddamn smart, clever boy.

But so far he had completely different priorities than school and good behavior. And Phil, frankly, did too. A million times more than grades, he was interested in the fact that when he left the office, Techno was still sitting in his chair instead of writing a political asylum application in North Korea. And that although he had been glancing uncertainly at him all the way down the corridor in complete silence, he didn't hesitate to step into the car. Admittedly, he took a seat behind the driver's seat, where Phil could hardly see him, but still - little things to please the heart.

"So?" He glanced in the mirror just in time to see the boy lean his forehead against the glass.

"So what?" He grunted, and the glass fogged up from his breath. He could have pretended to be confident and downright offended, but the nervous movements and trembling in his voice betrayed that he was uncomfortable.

Phil decided to be as careful as possible.

"Did you really call your teacher that way?"

"Why do you ask if you know?"

"I want to hear your version."

Techno scowled at him, clearly expecting a trick. His knee was twitching nervously, which he must have realized, as he gripped his fingers tightly around his thigh, trying to calm down.

"She said I had to tie my hair," he muttered finally, after a long pause. "For exercise."

Phil, not quite expecting any answer, glanced over his shoulder at him, taking advantage of the fact that they were waiting for the green light anyway.

"Yhm..." He nodded, trying to encourage him to go on. "And did you tied them up?"

"I did!" Techno straightened abruptly, but then pressed his back into the chair again. "But she still didn't like it and she said I did it wrong!" And she grabbed my hair!" His hand went to the nearest pink tangle. "Nobody touches my hair," he said forcefully, looking up for a second to meet Phil's eyes. "Never. So I told her she's stupid and to piss off."

Someone in the line behind them honked, and Phil immediately realized he was blocking traffic. He set off hurriedly, using the few seconds he had gained to go over all the information and think carefully about how he should and how he wanted to react.

"Okay."

There was complete silence in the car for a moment. And then Techno leaned out to peer at him through the gap between the seats.

"Okay?" He repeated with an expression that said that he was seriously questioning his mental health.

Phil nodded and smiled reassuringly at him. Immediately after that, however, he became serious, because, after all, he had a very important point to raise.

"She had no right to touch you without your consent," he noted at the outset. "I don't think she wants to do anything wrong, but she still shouldn't be doing it. Maybe I don't fully approve of the method, but I'm glad you know how to defend your own boundaries. But you can't just offend everyone who accidentally does something you don't want. Next time something like this happens, just get out of class or call me, okay? It's funny, but there's gonna be much less troubles if I tell her to 'piss off'."

Techno looked as surprised as when Wilbur complained that he didn't like broccoli and wouldn't eat it. As if he'd been exposed to a similar concept for the first time, and it went against all his previous experiences, so he wasn't sure if he should be angry or relieved.

This time he decided to try the second option, and although he still looked at Phil distrustfully, his knee finally stopped moving.

"If you say so..." he muttered, resting his forehead against the glass again. Phil gave him a few minutes to calmly digest what he had just heard.

"Techno?" When he spoke again, the boy's thoughts were clearly far away, for he flinched and blinked before looking up at him. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

The indignation on the child's face almost amused him.

"They were picking on something else?!"

"No, not at school. I ask... in general. Is there anything I should know about you. What I shouldn't do. Like not touching the hair."

Techno opened his mouth but hesitated, closed it and thought for a moment.

"No, I don't think so," he finally replied, and even if it probably wasn't entirely true, Phil was still happy that at least he'd tried to consider letting him get into one of the closely guarded secrets. And then the all the joy evaporated when the boy twisted a strand of hair around his fingers and in a strange, almost indifferent voice added: "My... My foster 'mother' once insisted on cutting it off. I said I didn't want to, but she did it anyway. I screamed and struggled and she cut my ear. And it hurt."

Phil thanked all the powers of the universe that he was driving, and has a great excuse not to have to meet his eyes. He was absolutely sure it would break his heart.

"Oh. Techno, I'm really sorry," he assured him, because although it didn't change anything, he felt he had to at least try to prove to Techno that he was on his side. That he considers everything that happened to him cruel, vile and unfair. Perhaps if he said it often enough, the boy would eventually understand he would never see anything like it again.

Techno was far from believing it so far. Or at least it seemed so until he pushed his hair behind his ear and asked:

"So you won't make me to cut it?"

Okay, pros and cons. Pros: he asked questions instead of drawing wrong conclusions right away. Cons: what the hell?

"Of course not. Why would I do this?"

"At school they said you should."

"The school should piss off," he snorted before he could bite his tongue. "And you look good in long hair."

Techno straightened up, clearly proud of himself.

"I know. I've never cut them since then. I like them long. It's like I'm saying "Fuck you, bitch!", but from a distance."

Phil closed his eyes for a second.

"Please, don't use these words in school..."

Techno was silent the rest of the way, but Phil didn't expect anything else. He himself had had enough for a day, and he had good reason to suspect that he wasn't half as emotionally tired as his child.

"Are you hungry?" He asked when they finally managed to reach their destination, and the boy immediately threw his backpack against the wall and jumped on the couch. "Did you ate your lunch? I can make you some sandwiches." There was no answer for a long moment, so he poked his head out of the kitchen. "Techno?"

The boy was still sitting on the couch, his arms wrapped around the pillow. Phil wasn't sure whether he was trying to hide behind it or use it as a weapon, but certainly one of the two, judging from the way his fingers tightened around its edges.

"I don't want anything," he muttered, and then, as Phil was beginning to wonder what he had done wrong this time, and at what point, he exhaled, "Are you going to punish me somehow or what?"

Ah. Okay. He could have sworn he had shown quite bluntly that he wasn't angry, but old habits didn't die that fast. Especially the negative ones.

"No, not really," he replied, slowly crossing the living room and perching on the back of the couch. "And even if I did, it would definitely be nothing you should be so afraid of."

Techno twitched uneasily.

"Like what?"

"Well... When Wilbur really crosses the line, I usually don't let him go out with his friends. In your case, it is unlikely to work, Prince of Darkness" he smiled, hoping the playful tone would calm the baby down a little "So I guess you'd have to say goodbye to TV for a while."

The boy frowned.

"That's all?"

"I'm open to any suggestions." Judging by the expression he made, Techno was definitely not going to tell him anything. "As I thought. Okay, and of the nicer things, how about..."

"Can I not go to PE?" Techno fired at the same time and Phil immediately fell silent, mentally sighing very, very hard. Just as he thought - it was too good to be true.

"Listen." He had to play it diplomatically and without using the 'cause I said so' argument. Which could turn out to be difficult, because to tell the truth, he couldn't really justify why running around the pitch is a necessary skill in life. "I'm sure nothing like this will happen again. But I will talk to your teacher if you want, and we'll surely explain it all somehow."

Techno, his expression flowing smoothly from stubbornness to desperation with each word, grimaced as he lowered his head and rested his forehead against the pillow. For a moment, Phil was absolutely convinced that he was just witnessing the beginning of the most ordinary childhood hysteria in the world, and was already gathering himself to somehow endure it, when suddenly a quiet, muffled by the material reached him:

"I don't want to dress up in front of others."

*Fuck.*

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!* He forgot! He totally forgot about it! More - *he didn't even think about it!* Something he knew from the start, from the bloody first day! Techno was still reluctant to wear short sleeves at home, where no one pointed it out or asked awkward questions. And okay, knowing him, he changed in the bathroom or figured out another way to keep his secret away from prying eyes, but it didn't really matter because he shouldn't have to do that at all. Phil should have anticipated all of this, they should talk about it, he should make sure he was ready for it, and best of all, take him from class right away, because of course he wasn't ready! Instead, Phil was preoccupied with an existential crisis and refraining from murdering the children first and then himself.

Great. Quite wonderful. Another point on the list.

And he had an appointment with a therapist only in a week...



"Oh, Techno..." Not really knowing what to do, he carefully shifted, crouching on the floor in front of the boy. He immediately pulled his legs up, practically crushing the pillow, but didn't pull away. Phil didn't deserve that glimmer of trust, not at the moment, so he was even more grateful for it. "I'm sorry. I didn't think about it at all. I'm so, so sorry."

Techno frowned and rested his chin on the pillow, peering at him above his knees.

"Why are you apologising?" He asked, which only made Phil feel even worse.

"Because it's my job to look after you and make sure you always feel safe and comfortable," he explained. "And I failed."

He refrained from adding 'again'. Admitting a mistake was one thing, but he definitely preferred to keep the remnants of the pretense that he knew what he was doing.

Techno wrinkled his nose.

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. You're very good at it. Even a little too good. You should just be a kid and not have to worry about it." He was afraid that this opportunity was long overdue. That, like Wilbur, Techno had already lost a part of himself that was no longer recoverable. But if Phil could save at least a scrap of his childhood, he intended to do absolutely anything to do it. "I'll sort it out, I promise. And thank you for telling me."

If the boy understood what he was trying to say, and how much it mattered, he didn't show it.

"I didn't really have any other choice, did I?" He snorted. "I won't do it myself, right?" His eyesight softened and he hid his face in the pillow again. "But thanks. I guess..."

Phil smiled, even if no one could see it.

And while he probably shouldn't have rewarded the boy in any way for getting into trouble at school, he temporarily pushed that awareness aside and spent the next two hours playing board games with him. And he lost on purpose only twice, and Techno only once argued that he should get a second roll of the dice because "I didn't throw it at all, it *fell out* of my hand!"

By picking up his second child from school, Phil was in a good mood with a chance to be great.

"Oh, before I forget!" Wilbur tossed his backpack into the rear seats and sat down next to him. "Sapnap said that his dad told him to tell me to tell you, that he hoped you were feeling better now."

Good humor died a tragic death on the spot.

Phil was eager to share its fate.

Maybe someday, in many, many years, he would be able to remember his conversation with Darryl and not die of shame in the process. One day. Definitely not now. But he promised

himself never to complain if any of the bushes in the garden mysteriously burned down. It was the least he could do to atone.

# Chapter 28

## Chapter Notes

Sooo~ My sister started another story with little Techno and baby Tommy. I've already read all chapters, 'cause I'm ✨special✨, but that means I know shit when I'm saying it's good and you all should read it!

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/31315724/chapters/77428067>

Going to therapy was the best decision Phil made.

Well, maybe second in line, right after taking in the children. Which was actually funny considering one follows in a straight line from the other. But either way - one of the best decisions. Even though he was paying an exorbitant amount just for someone to sit in a chair for an hour, taking notes and listening to him literally cry out all his pain, he hadn't been so peaceful and slept so peacefully in a long time.

That is, of course, until he was awakened by a scream in the middle of the night. Peace was the last thing he thought about as he ran down the dark corridor. Without turning on the light, because most of his consciousness would still be asleep, and the only active part operated only with basic commands. "Wilbur". "Danger". "Run".

And maybe "Fuck!" when he caught his foot on the corner of the cupboard. But the latter at least awakened him a bit.

He didn't even have to turn on the light - a large aquarium in the corner lit up the whole room enough to calm him down a bit. No psychopath with a knife, no fire, the window tightly closed, the number of children in the room at an optimal level. Nothing worth dying of of a heart attack in the middle of the night for. It was only after he had dismissed all potential dangers that he actually focused on the boy sitting on the bed, and immediately felt a painful spasm in his heart.

"Hey, Wilbur..." He slowly moved closer, perching on the edge of the mattress. "It's okay, I'm here..."

The child, huddled with legs tucked under his chin, face hidden behind his knees, and arms trembling in spasmodic sobs, immediately raised his head. For a second his eyes, wide and glistening in the cold light of the lamp, showed only terror, and Phil began to wish he had stayed at the door, for giving him a little more space. But then the boy's face twisted into a grimace of utter despair, and his arms raised and stretched out toward him, and Phil could concentrate only on granting this silent request immediately.

"It's okay now, it's all right," he repeated, pulling the boy onto his lap and letting him closed him up in a firm embrace. Wilbur's hands were still trembling, clutching his shirt, and the sobs turned to loud, open crying, but after all such nights, Phil knew it was a good sign. Long ago, through people who should never be able to get close to him at all, his boy was taught never to show emotions, especially negative ones. If he didn't feel really safe, he wouldn't have allowed himself to do this. "Bad dream?"

Wilbur nodded. He was clearly trying to calm down a bit, but he was still gasping for air in too fast, abrupt gulps, so Phil pushed him away slightly so he could mimic his own breathing. He still held him close, though, drawing little circles on his back with one palm, raising his other hand while inhaling and lowering it on the exhale. The boy followed its movement with a vigilant, far too alert gaze for the needs of a ten-year-old, gradually catching the right rhythm.

Somewhere from behind his back Phil heard the sounds of the filters and the water in the aquarium far too big for the needs of one small fish. But Milo was no ordinary pet, he was a family member, as Wilbur had explained to him a few days ago, and as such he deserved the best of everything. It was hard to disagree with this logic.

"Very good. You're doing great."

The child nodded again. All the energy seemed to be draining out of him with the fear, so Phil was not at all surprised when a few seconds later he slapped his face against his chest again, hugging him tightly, but not so desperately. It wasn't "Please, please, save me!" hug, more "I need to know you're still here" and no one with even a hint of human affection would be able to not answer it. In every way possible.

"You are very brave." He kissed the dark hair. "And I love you very, very much."

It's been a few weeks since they last spent the night like this. In fact, Phil was beginning to delude himself that perhaps this would never happen again. He knew it was very naive, and that he could never really have a complete guarantee, but he couldn't help clinging to a silent hope each time. For Wilbur's nightmares were something that terrified him utterly, more than if he were to fall victim to them himself. There was something so damn upsetting about this helplessness, so painful about it that he couldn't find any solution to the problem.

"It's just a bad dream," he had repeated for the first few months, during this strange period when Wilbur seemed to finally begin to trust him, with all his instincts still warning him at every turn. Phil remembered sitting on the floor next to the bed then, because the closeness and touch seemed to stress the child even more.

And he remembered, too, one night when Wilbur disentangled himself from the quilt and pushed himself off the mattress into his arms.

"It wasn't just a dream," he muttered, hiding his face in his shoulder.

Phil didn't understand right away, so he just stroked his back. And then suddenly he brought the facts together, and his hand froze for a second. And Wilbur started to tell.

Phil hated himself for how much he wanted to ask him to stop.

Less than two weeks later the boy came to his bedroom at night by himself.

"I had a dream about you," he whispered as Phil shifted to make room for him and cover both of them with the duvet.

He looked at his reddened eyes and wet cheeks and felt he wanted to cry himself.

"It wasn't a good dream, wasn't it?"

Wilbur didn't answer right away.

"No," he finally admitted. "But that's why I knew it was just a dream and I wasn't scared. Because you'd never..." He hesitated, then shook his head as if to ward off any remaining doubts. "Never."

He heard the floor creak and instinctively raised his head, torn from his memories. Techno was standing with the door ajar, barefoot, with a bear under his arm, his hair disheveled, and a sleep line on his cheek. He looked like any child pulled out of bed in the middle of the night, but his eyes were sharp, his face focused, and it was obvious there was not a single gram of sleepiness in him. It couldn't be, because probably in the same second that the scream awoke him, he was ready to run or fight.

Phil wanted to believe that his coming here was the first little sign that he was slowly beginning to believe that he would never have to do any of these things again. That he will never have anything to defend himself against.

He smiled slightly and opened his mouth, then hesitated and leaned over Wilbur instead.

"Techno can stay?" He asked in a whisper.

Wilbur didn't answer for a few long, slightly awkward seconds, but finally nodded and Phil immediately turned to Techno, gesturing him to come closer. The boy twitched uneasily and frowned.

"Is he okay?" He made sure, taking a few hesitant steps and craning his neck to see better.

Phil felt some kind of pride realizing that this was the question for him. It's hard to find a clearer proof of trust than the fact that Techno didn't recognize him as an attacker this time and didn't attribute any bad intentions to him on the spot.

"Just a bad dream," he explained, patting the mattress next to him encouragingly, but wasn't surprised when Techno sat down as far as possible.

"Oh..." He frowned, looking at Wilbur a little more closely. He glanced at his stuffed animal, hesitated, clearly recalculated something in his head, then pushed the bear towards the other boy. "Here. Take it."

Wilbur moved away from Phil, wiping his face with his sleeve.

"For me?" He made sure, and when he received a short nod in reply, he pressed the cuddly toy tightly to his chest. "Oh. Thank you..."

Phil stroked his hair while giving Techno the widest smile he could afford at the moment. And even if the boy immediately blushed and looked away, mumbling something incomprehensible under his breath, it was clear that he was pleased with himself too.

"Do you want me to read something to you?"

Wilbur didn't need any additional encouragement. He immediately threw his back on the pillow and leaned out to pick up the book from the bedside table. Phil playfully tossed the covers over him, relieved to see the boy laugh as he tried to disentangle. Any other day, he would lie down next to him, knowing all too well that whenever he dreamed of something bad he needed closeness and was becoming even more clingy than usual. Techno, however, didn't seem eager for similar sensitivities, in fact he seemed unsure if he was even welcome in the room and was starting to peek at the door. Phil was definitely not going to let him think that he was just a redundant accessory that no one would even notice if it disappeared.

"You can sit closer," he encouraged, taking his place himself more or less in the middle of the mattress, leaning his back against the wall.

Wilbur glanced at him with obvious rancor, but he seemed to understand his intentions, so in the end he only shifted the pillow and settled across the bed so he could still snuggle against his side. Techno, for a change, didn't even flinch. And it was, contrary to appearances, a very good sign, especially when he allowed Phil to throw the covers over his bare feet as well.

The first ten pages, read in the soft, even tone that he had mastered to perfection over the last year, were enough for Wilbur's eyelids to weigh heavily. Four more pages later, his breathing slowed, the hand on Phil's shirt loosened its grip, and he didn't even flinch as the man placed him in position a slightly less threatening to twist his neck.

Techno turned out to be a much tougher fighter. Perhaps because he hadn't expected Phil to read on, even after Wilbur had long since been unable to hear him. When Phil carefully released Steve from his son's embrace and handed over to his rightful owner, the boy seemed quite seriously expecting to be told to leave. It wasn't until a few minutes later that he relaxed; he rested his chin on the soft toy's head, tightly wrapping his arms around it, closing his eyes. Phil had never seen him so calm and relaxed before, but although he could have raved about it for hours, he was absolutely sure that falling asleep in this position would be very sore in the morning, and he was definitely not going to move him without permission. Which, for the time being, he probably had nothing to count on.

"You wanna stay here?" He asked when Techno flinched, stopping himself from falling asleep at the last moment. "Wilbur wouldn't mind. I can bring your pillow here if you want."

For a moment it was obvious the boy was seriously considering the offer, and he was almost sure he would agree. But then Techno glanced towards the door and his eyes instantly focused.

"I'll go to my room," he muttered, suppressing a yawn.

"Oh. Okay." Phil tried very hard not to show his disappointment. "You know... I usually read to Wilbur at bedtime. You can join if you want. I'm sure he'll be pleased." He smiled slightly. "I'll be happy too."

The boy didn't answer right away. In fact, it was hard to judge if he had heard at all, all his attention seemed to be focused on the aquarium throwing blue flashes against the walls.

"You really bought him that fish," he said suddenly, so detached from the conversation and the whole situation that for a moment Phil was sure he was just imagining it from exhaustion. But when he blinked to wake up, Techno continued to follow Milo's movements with the same, unreadable focus.

"Yeah, I know, I am weak.". He sighed heavily, only half in mock pain.

To his surprise, the boy shrugged.

"You're *nice* ," he corrected, still not even glancing at him. "And you didn't get pissed." He nodded at Wilbur. "He woke you up, but you're not pissed off."

Phil definitely should have expected something like this. And in some ways he was even prepared for it. The only thing that surprised him was how direct Techno could be. He kept all his fears deeply hidden, but as soon as one of his theories was debunked, he immediately waited for a concrete explanation. Phil wasn't entirely sure it was wholesome, but it was better than no conversation at all.

"Of course not. Why would I be angry?" He knew why (or rather why according to Techno), but while he should have been used to it after all those days when Wilbur was still making sure he hadn't done anything wrong, he still felt upset. He hated seeing his children so insecure and so used to being hurt. "He's just a child. And even if he was older... When you care about someone, you're glad they tells you when they needs help. It's okay that you want to be on your own and solve your own problems," he added quickly when Techno winced. "But sometimes you have to admit that something is beyond you. When the fire is small, a little water is actually enough and the problem disappears. But when your house is on fire, you don't try to run with a bucket, you just call the fire department. You understand me?"

Techno nodded slowly, though he didn't seem convinced at all.

"You want to be my fire department?" he made sure, and his surprise was mixed with the conviction that he was talking to someone at least insane.

Phil laughed and immediately glanced at Wilbur to see if he had accidentally woken him.

"Something like that, yeah. If only you let me."

Techno didn't answer. Phil didn't expect him to. Not yet. But as the boy stumbled sleepily to the door, he paused in the doorway and glanced over his shoulder at him.

"Call me if you read to him tomorrow too," he asked.

Nothing else was needed yet.





# Chapter 29

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Apart from this one, unfortunate incident, which ultimately turned out to be good for everyone, September passed in a relaxed, lazy atmosphere. Rainy and cold most of the time, but that was what Phil couldn't care less about, spending most of his evenings inventing more games and activities to keep the two bored boys busy and somehow keep them from being blinded by the computer screen. Techno, as it soon turned out, hated puzzle-solving and building houses of cards with almost the same passion that Wilbur despised clay-making and anything that required at least minimal throwing at the target ability. They both liked Monopoly a lot, especially the part where everyone was already on the verge of bankruptcy and the fun smoothly turned into cursing, cards and pawns. As for Phil, he blessed the day when he discovered that if he hid a box of sweets somewhere, scribbled a map, and came up with a few pseudo-rhymes, his boys would spend another hour chasing around the house in search of treasure and he could have a moment to rest in peace and drink a coffee.

However, no matter what creative heights he might climb, Wilbur was still a genre designed for mud-slinging and chasing with sticks, so Phil wasn't surprised when the boy burst into his office at nine a.m. on the first rainless Saturday, dressed and clearly ready to conquer the world.

"Schlatt came for me!" He announced, jumping from foot to foot. "I can go, right? Can I?"

Phil glared at him, more for dramatic effects than actually contemplating.

"I don't see why not," he said finally, as the boy started jumping up and down with impatience. "Just eat breakfast first!" He added, leaning back in his chair because Wilbur had already turned and ran halfway down the corridor.

"I've already eaten!"

Somehow Phil doubted it. It's more likely that he has filled his backpack to the brim with sweets and everyone will be sick with excess sugar by evening. Not that he had an idea how to actually fix it, so he just prepared himself mentally for "I don't want dinner, I'm not hungry" and went back to work. For about five minutes before Wilbur burst into the room a second time, this time with his jacket and one shoe on.

"I'm taking Techno with me!" He informed, grinning in a broad smile.

Phil frowned.

"Oh." Not that he wasn't overjoyed, but sometimes he seriously wondered if his child might be too powerful for his own good. "Does he know about it?"

There was no one to answer him, because Wilbur's feet were already pounding on the steps of the stairs, so with the heavy pain of the old (as he was constantly reminded of) bones, Phil followed him to experience the miracle for himself.

Indeed, Techno was one of the three boys crowding the hall. The only one fully dressed, one should add, because Schlatt, holding the door open with his foot so that the chilly wind wouldn't find it difficult to get in, had his jacket open and his hat tucked into the back pocket of his jeans, and Wilbur continued to search the sleeves of all coats to find scarf.

As soon as Phil appeared nearby, Techno immediately looked up at him, expressing absolute helplessness.

"He forced me," he said, pointing to Wilbur, and it was hard to judge whether he expected real help or just sympathy.

Phil, at least, chose neither of these options.

"Well done," he said, taking his own scarf off the shelf and handing it to Wilbur, hoping that the sooner they walked away, the sooner his feet would stop freezing from the draft. "Will you be in the park?" He wrapped the scarf tightly around most of the boy's face, receiving a frustrated grunt in return. "I'll pick you up around three."

Wilbur disentangled himself from the cloth and gave him a look Phil had never been able to say no to.

"Around four?"

This time it couldn't be otherwise.

"Okay," he conceded. "Let it be. But you're supposed to answer the phone. Seriously, one missed call and you go home."

"Mhm." Wilbur, who had probably stopped listening as soon as he got what he wanted, already had his hand on the doorknob. "Bye! I love you!"

Phil sighed. Sometimes he forgot that there was simply no way to get angry with the child.

"I lo-"

"I love you too, Dadza!"

He rolled his eyes.

"I also have very strong feelings for you, Schlatt," he muttered, watching the two boys away and shifting his gaze to the third, still lurking behind, as if hoping to miss the terrible compulsion to play with his peers. "Have fun, Techno."

The boy looked at him, expressing everything but joy and excitement.

"I'll try," he grunted. "If I have to."

It had been centuries since Phil had the house all to himself. Or maybe it was just that he felt that somewhere between Wilbur's arrive and the present day the term "empty house" evolved in his mind to "finally have time to clean up in peace!" Anyway, it was nice to actually focus on one thing and not have to interrupt it every five seconds on average because "Techno destroyed my tower!" or "Wilbur won't come out of the bathroom." In the long run, the silence would surely irritate him, but for one afternoon it was a balm for all wounds.

So much so that he forgot to prepare any dinner. On the other hand, he was in a good mood and one small pizza hadn't hurt anyone yet. At least he had a guarantee that the kids would eat everything without whining. The only thing he couldn't magically replace or postpone was actually picking up the boys from the park. Five boys because, apparently, Wilbur had no hesitation in offering everyone a lift, not in his car and without even being a driver.

"Did you have a good time, Techno?" Phil asked as the last child slammed the door and sped toward the house. He turned, partly to get well out of the drive, partly to be able to judge in peace at last that he might be carrying a ticking time bomb at the moment.

Techno just shrugged, busy drawing across the glass in a smudge of steam from his breath.

"He didn't play with us at all!" Said Wilbur, looking as if he was trying hard to be offended but found the whole situation a little too funny. "He just talked to Dream all the time."

Phil knew full well that he obviously should have been indignant at this fact, which he didn't have to understand to show his solidarity, but he couldn't help but grin. Would he prefer Techno to choose anyone else as a friend? Yes. But thank God he started talking to *anyone*!

"Techno may have other friends than you, Wilbur," he admonished mildly.

"But it's Dreeeam!"

"He's a nice boy."

"Maybe for you!" He crossed his arms, looking away. "He's so bossy!"

Phil could fully agree with this. Maybe not aloud and not in front of children, but he could.

Techno slowly lowered his hand from the glass.

"You tried to throw him out of his fort," he muttered, glancing at Wilbur, who wrung his hands dramatically.

"And we would have succeeded if you had *actually helped*!"

Phil decided not to interfere anymore, patiently enduring the child's arguing about who and why had or did not have the rights to the super precious fort of sticks and mud. He had a feeling that he could understand little of this discussion anyway. But when they finally got home and Wilbur immediately jumped out of the car proudly waving his keys, Phil stopped Techno inside with one meaningful glance.

"I was serious, you know?" He assured as the boy slowly withdrew his hand from the doorknob and glanced at him uncertainly. "You can be friends with whoever you want. I want you and Wilbur to get on well, but that doesn't mean you have to spend all days together. You have the right to do whatever you want, and if Wilbur starts whining, just remind him of that. Sometimes he's a little... possessive."

Techno, who clearly expected some reprimand and only relaxed a bit in the middle of the speech, slowly nodded his head.

"And you won't be angry?" he made sure.

"I won't be angry." Phil will keep myself from asking why the hell would he be angry." Sometimes it was easier not to know. He could then sleep much more peacefully. "Wilbur won't be either. Not really. He just likes to be dramatic."

Techno didn't seem completely convinced. On the other hand, regardless of the subject, he was always vigilant and seemed to just as a rule not to fully trust anything that was promised him, so it was absolutely nothing new. Phil once again promised himself to change that and, once again, set himself up in advance for at least a few months of hard work in difficult conditions.

What he was completely unprepared for was seeing his children in the full light of the hall lamp. They both had dirty jackets, wet pants, and their shoes, soaked with water as if they were trying to smuggle new friends for Milo in them, left more and more puddles on the floor. Phil felt cold by just looking at them, and when the image of misery and despair was completed by cold-trembling fingers, he immediately sent them both to a hot shower. They must have been really cold and tired, because no one protested, not even when he sat them on the couch, in their pajamas and bathrobes, and made them drink their tea. Only after that did their cheeks regain some natural color.

Considering all of this, no one was surprised when they both started sniffing that same evening, and Wilbur had nearly fallen asleep on the couch a good two hours before bedtime. He didn't have a fever, fortunately, but he probably had a runny nose and used up his energy for the next few days. Though not enough to stop whining and complaining.

"Come on." Phil grabbed him under his arms, pulling him off the mattress, completely oblivious to the displeased hum and scrubbing socks on the floor. "Come on, get up and go to bed. I won't carry you up the stairs, you're too heavy."

The boy scowled at him, puffing up his phalanges.

"I'm not!"

"You definitely are."

"The last time you carried me, you said I don't weigh anything!"

"You've grown."

"That was a week ago!"

"You see how fast it goes?" He seated the child on the lowest step, implying that he had no intention of straining his spine more than necessary. If he had the strength to whine, he also had the strength to use his feet. "This is how healthy sleep works. Sleep on for another month and you'll finally reach the top shelf. Techno?" Pink hair immediately appeared above the back of the couch. "Will you come alone or do you need a special invitation?"

Techno, somewhat surprisingly, immediately sprang to obey the order. Perhaps he sensed a hint of impatience in Phil's voice, or he might have had the sense himself to know that further exhaustion of the body would definitely not do him any good. Or maybe he just didn't like the idea of being pulled like a sack of potatoes. Either way, a few minutes and one very dramatic climb up the stairs later, both boys finally ended up under the cover. One cover because sick or not, they clearly didn't intend to give up their evening reading. Phil didn't even have the heart to try to deny them that, not when Techno still seemed to expect that he might lose that privilege at any moment. He still kept his distance a bit and made and left room for Wilbur to separate him from Phil. But the mere fact that he let the other boy rest head on his shoulder and didn't pull away even when he actually fell asleep with practically all his weight on him was definitely a very, very good sign. One of those thanks to which the whole difficult, slowly process seemed to be worth its cost.

\* \* \*

Phil was absolutely not surprised when one of his children actually fell ill. He had expected it to be Wilbur rather, but it didn't really make much difference. Maybe just that, instead of feeling sorry for himself and putting himself dramatically on the furniture, Techno was clearly trying to hide all the symptoms. To some extent, he even managed to do so - it was only his cough that started in the late afternoon and had turned from spontaneous coughing to true attacks of breathlessness by the time of supper.

"I'm fine," the boy muttered, pushing Phil's hand away as he tried to check for a fever. It would have sounded more convincing if he hadn't immediately coughed again. Only then did he give up in an unequal fight and, swallowing almost a glass of water at once, patiently endured the drastic procedure of putting his hand to his forehead.

Phil frowned.

"You're warm," he said, withdrawing his hand to not testing the child's patience for longer than necessary. "Something hurts you? Throat? Head?"

Techno grimaced as he spooned his virtually untouched petals. Lack of appetite immediately hit the list of symptoms.

"Head," he murmured finally, when it became obvious that he wouldn't be able to silence the question. "But only a little. And the nose."

Phil was absolutely sure that 'little' meant 'hell' and this was just the beginning of the actual list, but he decided not to push. Until a month ago, Techno would probably have told him to fuck off, and would locked himself in a room to die in solitude through his own stubbornness. He was able to appreciate change, even if it was small and slow.

Maybe he was overestimating it, because when he came back from the kitchen with another glass of water and a box of pills, Techno, resting his chin on his forearms stretched out on the counter, only glanced at his hands then immediately straightened and almost jumped in his chair.

"I'm not taking it," he announced, his voice strong. Phil was about to roll his eyes and give a long lecture on taking care of himself and his health, but something about the boy's face made him quit and looked at him more closely instead.

He was still far from fully understanding, and most of the time he was more guessing than actually knowing what his older child was up to at the moment. But what he knew and understood all too well were the differences between the times when the boy was just stubborn and tried to spite him, and when he was really afraid of something. Those were never big signs, Techno always tried to look as confident as possible, but was betrayed by the way his hand tightened on his thigh to stop its trembling, his quick, nervous breathing and wide-eyed eyes leading to a box of medicines, as if afraid that if he only lost sight of it for a second, its contents would magically teleport right into his stomach.

Phil wouldn't be surprised if this was what he imagined and expected.

"Wilbur?" He turned to the other child, but not looking in his direction, too busy with silent stare competition. "Are you sure you packed for school?"

"Yup!" Wilbur, completely uninterested in the whole situation, just waved his legs cheerfully. "I su-" He met Phil's gaze and instantly became serious. "Oh. Oh! I'll go check it out."

He slid off his chair and trotted toward the stairs, glancing over his shoulder again and again, causing him to nearly trip over the first step. Phil waited for his footsteps to fade before turning his attention back to his other child, squirming nervously in his chair as if he too wanted to run as far as possible.

"I'm not taking this." He repeated, and this time there was much less certainty and much more fear. "You can't make me."

Damn it. Maybe he shouldn't send Wilbur away after all? Techno usually felt much more confident in his presence, treating it as a kind of guarantee. His reasoning seemed very simple and, in a way, logical: Phil liked Wilbur. Phil never hurt Wilbur. Wilbur would have been scared if Phil had unexpectedly hurt Techno, so as long as he was around - everyone was safe. The theory had a lot of holes and missed the heart of the problem fairly wide, but for the time being it was still the best they had come up with.

But Phil wasn't going to make his relationship with Techno just dependent on his son's presence, no matter how much it would make his life easier.

He carefully put the box down on the table, trying to ignore the boy's expression on how much he wanted to take it and throw it out the window. And follow it himself.

"How could I make you?"

Techno opened his mouth, but immediately closed it again. He frowned and looked at Phil as if he were reminding him a mortal betrayal.

"I won't give you ideas," he grunted, crossing his arms. "I'm not stupid."

"Of course you're not," he agreed, hoping it would calm him down a bit. "You're bloody smart, I told you, remember?" The boy's gaze did soften a bit, but he was still damned distrustful and kept glancing stealthily at the box. "Techno, look at me," he said, and sighed inwardly, trying to pull himself together and prepare for an interview that he wished he'd never be ready for. "Has anyone ever tried to make you take some medication? Without your consent?"

A few long, heavy seconds passed before Techno stared down at his lap and, tightening his lips tightly, nodded slowly.

Phil would love to be surprised. He wished he could see all the boy's behavior - his distrust of food, how he always picked a portion that wasn't meant to be for him - and not make a damn unpleasant conclusion from it. He would like to still have enough faith in people to believe that such things just don't happen. Well, maybe sometimes, somewhere far away, but definitely not here, and not to any of the children he knows, for whom he's responsible, for whom he cares about. This should never go beyond a hypothetical scenario or a very sad social campaign whose commercials are making you feel guilty. He should be able to transfer some amount to the account given on the screen and forget about the whole thing, because what else would he do?

The worst part was that he still didn't know. He had no idea what he should do, and the problem was definitely neither fictional nor far away and it affected him very, very much.

Out of the shortage of other ideas, he decided to start with the simplest possible.

"Can you tell me more about it?" He asked and to his surprise, Techno nodded again after a few seconds of silence.

"I didn't want to take it," he muttered, as if expecting someone to try to put all the blame on him. "I said I don't want to! I was sleeping after that, all the time! And she said it's because I'm making too much noise and disturbing her, but it's bullshit!" He blinked rapidly and sniffled loudly. Phil could have bet it had nothing to do with a runny nose. "She just didn't want me there, but they were paying her to keep me!"

Phil waited a moment for the boy to take a few deep, shuddering breaths and calming down a bit.

"You mean your foster mother?" He made sure, crouching down so that the child wouldn't feel so cornered. "The same one that cut your hair?"

He definitely did wrong to bring up this topic. Techno's lips twitched, and though he tried his best to hold back the tears, he was starting to struggle with it.

"She said it made me look like a girl and that she was ashamed of me..." he muttered with such regret and deeply hidden pain that Phil forgot immediately that he was trying to convince him of anything. Instead, he just wanted to find any words that could, at least slightly, repair the damage and bring any comfort. Before he could find them, however, if they actually existed, Techno slapped his nose loudly, rubbed his eyes violently with his sleeve, and pushed the chair away from the table so aggressively that he almost knocked it over. "Everyone get away from me!"

Phil didn't even try to stop him. He just watched helplessly as the boy ran up the stairs, and with a heavy sigh, he straightened as the door slammed upstairs. He was starting to get used to it.

He wondered if all this should really be so difficult, or was he just not good enough for it? Maybe he should have stopped while he was still in control and not set the bar higher than he could jump. Wilbur was much easier on him. Equally scared and distrustful, but so desperate for any change for the better, he clung to every little act of kindness and didn't plan on letting go. The first time he got really sick, Phil put him in bed with a fever, only to find him just as inflamed and probably even more weak in the morning, but fully clothed and ready to go to school.

"You never stayed home when you were sick?" He asked, when he managed to wrap the boy in the covers up to his neck again.

Wilbur shrugged.

"Sometimes," he admitted, turning to his side and reaching for Phil's hand, probably mostly to have an excuse not to meet his eyes. "But I didn't like staying home. At least no one at school yelled at me and I wasn't scared." He squeezed his fingers a little tighter and finally looked at him, smiling uncertainly. "But it's nice here, I just forgot."

Phil hated to be looked at him that way - like a kitten grateful that no one had ever put him in a sack and tossed him into the river. He hated how damn guilty he felt then, although he knew perfectly well that for most of the harm Wilbur had suffered, he couldn't help it. Phil's only fault was that he had somehow failed to find him sooner. And that was more than enough to make him feel mean.

Taking care of Techno was a much more difficult challenge, because anger with the system, people and the whole world as such was also accompanied by anger and disappointment with oneself. Because sometimes he just didn't have enough patience. Sometimes he had to leave the room, cool down, and only then try to talk to the boy without yelling at him. Sometimes he didn't know what to do or how to deal with it, and he just wanted to give up. To stop trying, since his efforts didn't produce a magical solution and an immediate effect.

He had never done it and he knew perfectly well that the vast majority of his problems were the classic charms of parenting. Parents get angry with their children. Sometimes very much. Sometimes down to the point where they have to stop, close their eyes and repeat in their



head ten times that yes, I wanted it, this gremlin is here of my own free will and I won't kill him because I love him more than my life. Why shouldn't he be entitled to these emotions? Because his children weren't biologically his? After all, he didn't believe that if he had any kinship with them and this strange, mystical bond of blood, and not a pile of signed documents and sincere will, he would automatically get an extra layer of patience and a "Good Parent" package.

But sometimes, looking at Techno, he wondered if his anger was really fair. Would he be as irritated if Wilbur had been in his place? Or if he sometimes - only sometimes! - didn't assume that the boy was doing something deliberately to upset him. Did he treat his children unequally? Certainly not, not really. Notwithstanding the fact that the legal situation was the same in both cases, Wilbur was his son, while Techno... Techno was the child he was cared for. He was his child, but the bond between them was still fragile and thin, and neither of them could quite be sure when or if that would change at all. It wasn't anyone's fault. There was no reason to find any fault whatsoever. Phil didn't have to love Techno to feel sorry for him and want the best for him. To see him as a scared, hurt child, not the devil in human skin, as he portrayed himself.

But at times there was a longing in him for an affection he hadn't yet had. And at times this lack seemed to be a huge, cold void that he couldn't fill. And at times he really believed that everything would be easier if he only finally learned to love his second child as much as he loved the first.

For the time being, however, he had no spell at hand that would enable him to do so, so he was condemned to more traditional methods.

"Techno?" He knocked on the door. "Can you let me in? I just want to talk. I promise you that I won't force you to do anything. And I'm not angry." He waited a moment, but only silence answered him, so he tried again. "Techno. Please open the door."

The boy probably sensed that stubbornness alone wouldn't do much, because he decided to put heavier ammunition into the fight.

"They're not locked up, you moron!"

Phil bitten at the tip of his tongue with a harsh reply, but immediately remembered the horrified gaze staring at the medicine box. A little boy. Not a devil in human skin. Little scared boy...

"You know I won't come in until you let me," he replied, trying to sound like he was ready to stand by the door even all night long. In truth - he ready was. But he would preffer not to.

Perhaps this was the key. Not sincere concern and desperation, but knowing that Phil is ready to hang almost literally over his head and not let go until he gets his way. Somewhere deep in the room, there were soft, careful footsteps, tapping and scraping of something on the panels, then another, this time faster clapping of feet. And, finally, thrown hesitantly:

"You can come in."

Phil tried very hard to hide his surprise and appear as if he knew what he was doing when he entered the room. It turned out that it was completely unnecessary, because the only trace of human presence that he found in the room was a mound of a duvet, in the perfect size of a child.

"Hi." He sat on the edge of the mattress, almost expecting to be met with some kind of protest immediately. When only silence answered him, he tugged lightly on the edge of the cover without trying to pull it off. "Could you take it off, please?"

The bedding pile made a low murmur.

"For what?"

"Cause I'd like to see you when I'm talking with you." Another, this time louder and longer hum, but, surprisingly, the quilt landed on the foot of the bed, and Phil could admire in all its glory the messy hair, red eyes, and a scowl on boy's face. "Ah, much better, thank you," he complimented, smiling, but then he grew serious as the kid tightly wrapped arms around his legs, resting chin on knees. "Techno, listen." He slipped off the bed, crouching next to him. The subject of the conversation itself was difficult, he didn't want to aggravate the matter by forced closeness. And the boy definitely appreciated private space. "Someone did something very bad to you. And you have every right to be angry and not trust me."

The child scowled at him.

"But?"

Phil shook his head.

"No, there is no 'but'. I can tell you I'm so sorry about that because it's true. And that I will never do anything like that, because that's also true. But I have such a quiet feeling you won't believe me."

Techno said nothing, staring at his own feet, but Phil could see he was slowly relaxing. Phil had noticed long ago that he usually works this way: he reacts quickly and sets himself up to attack, only to lower his guard a little later. He suspected that it made great sense in his life so far, when constant vigilance could actually save his skin more than once, but he hoped very much that soon they would be able to work on it a bit. Not to change it completely, he wasn't so naive, Wilbur's upbringing had already verified his expectations and possibilities, but maybe softened it a bit."

And maybe Techno wanted it too, because after a moment of silence he sighed loudly.

"I want to believe you," he said, still not looking in his direction. "And I'm sorry for yelling at you." He rested his forehead on his knees, but his ears were suddenly red. "And that I called you a moron."

Phil immediately felt his heart lighter.

"Sorry to scare you," he replied, then felt a wave of affection flood him as Techno finally looked up and smiled, still weak and hesitant, but certainly sincere. And then he started coughing. "Okay, now go back under the covers." Phil lifted the edge of the duvet to show that he wasn't going to take no for an answer. "You're going to sleep!"

The child blown up with indignation.

"It's too early!"

"No. You will soon get sick here and infect Wilbur. And he doesn't just get sick, but says goodbye to life dramatically." He shuddered at the mere mention. "Under the covers, and in the morning we'll see what's next."

With reluctance and grunts expressing absolute oppression and unimaginable suffering, Techno finally threw himself on the pillow, pulling the quilt up to his neck. He could whine as much as he wanted, but judging by his melting into the mattress immediately, his body fully agreed with the proposal for a long, healing sleep.

"And I don't have to take anything?" he made sure, which on the one hand was good, because Phil had the opportunity to clarify a few things and set some boundaries, on the other - bad. For exactly the same reasons.

Well, no one said it would always be easy and fun.

"Not today", he promised at the beginning not to stress the child unnecessarily. "But I can't promise you that won't happen eventually. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or some time after that. This is a serious matter because your health is at stake, so I'm going to have to be a little more resolute than usual." Techno frowned, so he quickly added, "I promise I will never force you or trick you into doing anything." As if such an idea was ever taken into account at all and fell within his moral standards... "But it will probably happen more than once that I will have to convince you to do so."

He wouldn't call it a "contract." If anything, Techno simply accepted the harsh reality and tried to swallow the facts somehow. He certainly wasn't planning on making any compromises and making things easier. But still, it was some kind of success. Some little progress. And Phil had learned to appreciate that. And he also knew how to reward them, so he spent the next hour reading the boy's chosen book, in an increasingly quieter, more sleepy tone, until Techno actually fell asleep, with his face half hidden in the pillow and his hair spilled on the pale pillowcase. Phil wrapped the quilt tighter around him, making sure not to touch him, but as he pulled his hand away, he froze for a moment, his hand just above the boy's. He remembered how strange but kind it felt to hold Wilbur's hand for the first time. As sometimes still, this simplest gesture seemed to him the most overwhelming.

He withdrew his hand, put the book on the bedside table, and backed away as quietly as he could towards the door.

## Chapter End Notes

Here comes yours fluff aaand just a little bit of angst... ✨OOPS✨  
Have fun!

# Chapter 30

## Chapter Notes

Here comes some comfort! And here comes @SylviaoftheDepths with her beta skiles!  
(~ ~).o.:\*♡

Phil was used to being awakened in the middle of the night by unpleasant sounds. Sometimes it was crying, sometimes it was a muffled scream, sometimes it was just a quiet "Can I sleep with you tonight?" and the sight of a crying child at the threshold of the room. But a choking cough was never on the list. Until now.

When he stepped out into the hallway, still sleepy and confused, Wilbur was already standing outside the door, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Techno won't let me in," he complained as soon as he noticed the oncoming relief. "I knocked, but he doesn't answer. He's just coughing terribly."

Phil hummed understandingly, partly because he still didn't have much strength to put the words together, and partly because he didn't know what to say. Instead of bothering with theory, he decided to go straight to practice and knocked on the door himself. In accordance with Wilbur's words, silence answered him first, then a cough that made a shiver run down his spine, immediately chasing away the remnants of sleepiness. Techno sounded like he was about to spit his own lungs out. Moreso - as if he had already tried to do it, but got stuck somewhere halfway.

"Techno?" He knocked again, much louder. "Can you hear me?"

He was absolutely aware that the question wasn't only futile but also idiotic. Judging by the sounds, even if the boy were to answer him, he was just a little too busy choking. For the sake of his own peace of mind (and for argument's sake, if he was later reminded of it), he knocked again before grabbing the door handle.

"I'm going in," he announced, pushing the door open only to meet unexpected resistance.

He pushed again, harder this time, pressing his shoulder against it. Somewhere on the other side, you could hear something heavy scraping the panels, and the door opened a little, but not enough to let him squeeze through the crack. He cursed under his breath, immediately swearing again, this time in his mind, because Wilbur definitely had a rich vocabulary even without his help.

"I think he blocked them with something," he guessed, slipping his hand between the door and the jamb. Just at the level of the handle, his hand found something wide, flat and

probably wooden.

Techno coughed once more. Phil immediately stepped back and pushed once more. It shuffled again, the door squeaked, and finally it swung open enough to enter.

The room was dim, as usual ever since the aspiring vampire had moved in. Phil didn't turn on the light, not wanting to expose the boy to additional stimuli, but he silently thanked himself from a few hours ago for leaving the bedside lamp on. He looked around, frowning. A chest of drawers. Techno had moved a chest of drawers to the door. Phil pushed it aside, back to its original place - it wasn't really heavy, not for an adult, but for a ten-year-old it certainly seemed like an impassable barricade. He probably had to put his feet up against the wardrobe to move it at all.

He decided for the moment not to think about why he was doing that at all, even if he knew the answer in advance. For the moment, much more important was the boy himself, curled up in the crumpled sheets, shivering with cold under the covers and the thick blanket. In the dim light of the lamp, Techno's skin almost seemed to glow, sweaty and flushed with fever. Phil put a hand to his forehead just to be sure, but it only confirmed his suspicions.

"Wilbur, get me a first aid kit," he said over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the boy. He tried to adjust the quilt a little, but as soon as he pulled it off his shoulders, Techno made a soft noise, something between a squeal and a whimper, pressing even harder into the crumpled sheets. He was awake, but certainly not fully conscious either, balancing somewhere in between, occasionally opening his eyes and staring at Phil with unseeing eyes. "And water. A whole bottle." Another bout of coughing sounded like the kid's stomach was planning to join his lungs on their journey out of his body. "And maybe a bowl from the bathroom. Be fast, okay?"

He turned to urge his son, but Wilbur was no longer on the threshold. He didn't show up until a few minutes later, a box of medication in one hand, water in the other, and a plastic bucket under his arm.

"I couldn't find the bowl," he explained. "He can throw up to this, right?"

Phil sighed heavily.

"Let's hope he won't," he muttered, remembering all too well how his last hope of improving his health had run out. The universe, apparently, listened very carefully to his requests and did absolutely everything to prevent them from being fulfilled. "Go back to bed. It's still early."

Wilbur looked almost indignant.

"I want to help," he said, and it was as endearing as it was tiring. "I'm good at helping."

Phil motioned for him to lower his voice a bit.

"I know you are," he said, and flinched at another bad cough attack. "But I don't think Techno would like you to see him like this."

Wilbur frowned.

"Why? It's okay to be sick," he said, which was bloody hard to argue with. "Everyone's sick sometimes. You said so yourself. That you don't have to be ashamed of it. You said so," he added, as if it were an argument of ultimate power that surpassed all others. In his opinion, it probably was. At times, Phil was almost scared by the influence he had on his children.

"I said so," he confirmed, choosing his words carefully. "It's true, and I'm glad you remember it. You can talk about it and explain it to him when he gets better, but for now I want you to respect his boundaries, okay?"

He tried to dismiss the boy and give him a more important task so he wouldn't feel disrespected. Phil wasn't sure if it was that he had succeeded, or the fact that Techno had just rolled over and curled into a trembling ball, looking like all nine circles of hell. In any case, Wilbur's shoulders slowly sagged, stubbornness replaced by concern.

"But you'll call me if something happens?" He made sure still. "I can be useful. I don't want anything bad to happen to him."

Despite all the fatigue and mounting stress, Phil felt his heart filling up with only tenderness for a moment.

"I promise," he said, as he followed the boy to the door.

As soon as he closed it, he immediately shifted all his attention to his second, much more in-need child.

Techno was not particularly cooperative. In fact, he resisted very actively, and it was only after Phil had wrapped him in the quilt like a cocoon and slipped behind him, preventing him from returning to the carefully shaped nest on the bed, that it was possible to hold him upright long enough for him to drink water on his own. Which the boy did very willingly. Far too willingly, as he immediately choked and coughed again. Fortunately, he didn't test the bucket's capabilities, but Phil was personally supervising the next batch of water with one hand over the glass.

It was definitely not the most comfortable position he had ever found himself in. Not only because he was sitting in a sweaty bed, a boy was shivering with the cold with his back against his chest, and the heat emanating from his body slowly became unpleasant. In fact, Phil wasn't really recording any of these things, much busier with planning each next move with a growing conviction that sooner or later he was sure to do something wrong. Mainly because he had no idea how far he could actually push. Techno was clouded by a fever and his contact with the world was clearly very limited, but that was no excuse to violate his boundaries more than absolutely necessary. Touch was always something he resisted and clearly disliked, and Phil tried his best to respect it. On the other hand, sometimes the situation just called for it, and he had to put common sense over comfort. He already felt it wouldn't be a pleasant experience for either of them.

"Can you hold a thermometer in your mouth?" He asked, but Techno chose exactly the same moment to start chattering. Well, better now than with a piece of plastic between them. "I

need to take your temperature somehow. You can hold it under your arm, but I'll have to touch you, okay?" The boy was shaking his head before he finished the sentence. On the one hand, Phil was glad he was clearly more awake than he looked. On the other... "Okay, I understand. Can you do it yourself?"

Techno nodded, giving the impression that it took far too much time and energy to get his head back up. And just as much to not get lost in his own T-shirt and finally put the thermometer in place, pressing the arm to the side even more than necessary.

Phil smiled at him.

"Great. Thank you."

If the boy registered the praise at all, he didn't show it, too busy falling asleep, with his head resting on his shoulder in a rather unnatural position. Phil shifted to make it a little more comfortable for both of them, all the while making sure most of their contact was blocked by the quilt.

It felt like ages, full of wheezing breath, even worse coughing and the occasional bouts of shivering, before the thermometer finally signaled the end of the measurement. Phil gently shook the boy to wake him up.

"Can you pass it to me? Thermometer?"

The vast majority of the child's consciousness was in another, probably much nicer world, judging by how long it actually took him to obey the order, but Phil wasn't going to complain about it at all. In fact, it might have turned out to be his only lifeline, because when he read the temperature, he was absolutely sure that he wouldn't be able to do without the help of modern medicine. Well, he had been sure of it since he had put the kid to bed a few hours earlier, but he obviously liked to lie to himself and count on a miracle.

Following the principle of small steps, he started with something for a fever, which turned out to be the perfect choice, because as soon as the pill was in his sight, Techno immediately woke up completely. Mentally, because his body seemed to have rather different plans, so even though his eyes showed panic and the will to fight, he could only clumsily try to push the man away from him, not having enough strength to actually move him even an inch. But he struggled so much that the pill almost landed on the bed. If it had been cough syrup, it probably wouldn't have been so lucky.

Phil was fully prepared for it, but still a little surprised by such a strong reaction.

"Techno, please..." he sighed heavily, trying to hold the boy and not touch him at the same time, which only worked because, while fidgeting and kicking, Techno got tangled in the covers.

*At least he's not screaming*, Phil thought with some relief, and immediately felt the urge to slap himself.

Because of course the boy wasn't screaming. To scream required him to open his mouth.



Phil knew he was thinking about it way too often, but he really wanted to kill a few carefully selected people right now...

"Techno, listen to me," he tried from the other side, holding both hands up so the child could see them. "I'm not gonna do anything, okay? Nothing without your consent." Techno calmed down a bit, but his eyes were still wide and his mouth was tightly pressed together. Even when a coughing fit shocked him the next second, he kept his hand over it, turning so that Phil couldn't reach them. Definitely one of the saddest things he has ever seen in his life. And a lot of them have accumulated over the last year. "Techno, I just want to help you. You have to take medication or you won't feel better. I know you're scared," he continued as the boy started shaking his head. "And I know you have very, very bad memories of that. But it's really important that you trust me this one time."

Techno made a hollow grunt, probably meaning 'Over my dead body', which felt far too close to the truth, and Phil felt that difficult times required drastic measures.

"I said I'd never hurt you, remember?" He asked a bit sharper than before, leaning in such a way that Techno had to look at him, whether he wanted to or not. "Have I ever broken that promise?"

The child's face was utterly torn apart. His eyesight softened a little, and although his lips were still pressed tightly together, he paused and rested sideways against his chest, clearly tired and on the verge of falling asleep. Phil didn't like to take advantage of moments of weakness, really. But he was even less fond of going to the emergency room, so he slowly lowered his hand and let the boy hesitantly take the pill from him. He twirled it in his fingers for a moment, looking at it from every angle, clearly looking for something familiar, but finally, with obvious reluctance, he put it in his mouth. He took a glass of water and took a long sip, then nodded.

Phil frowned.

"Did you swallow?" he made sure. Another nod didn't dispel his doubts a bit. "Could you open your mouth, please?"

Techno shot him a look that was supposed to be murderous, but since he was a threat only to himself in his present state, it had no effect. He took another sip of water and handed back the glass with a little more panache than was necessary.

"*Fine*," he grunted, very unhappy that his plan had been exposed.

He was even more unhappy when he swallowed the syrup, but here, at least, Phil was sure he wouldn't come up with anything weird.

He wrapped the boy in a blanket and sat him on a chair so that he could change the sheets to fresh ones, prompted by chattering teeth.

"You should change," he assessed, and the boy wrapped himself in an even tighter cocoon, as if the mere thought of being exposed to the cold was causing him physical pain. "Can you do

it yourself?" Techno shook his head. "Do you want me to help you?" Another, even more decisive denial. "Okay. So this has to be enough for now."

He lifted the edge of the quilt and the boy immediately jumped under it, immediately hiding himself entirely under it, including his head.

"It's cold," he complained, unnecessarily, because that could be seen with the naked eye.

"You're gonna warm up." Phil tossed another blanket over him to be sure. "Do you need anything else? Water? Or I can make you some tea. It'd be good for your throat."

Techno didn't answer. His breathing slowed considerably and straightened, his muscles relaxed, and had it not been for the heat and coughing still emanating from him, he would have looked completely healthy and at peace. Phil left the room as quietly as he could, leaving the door ajar, just in case.

It was almost six, and it didn't make much sense to go back to bed, especially since he wasn't sleepy anymore, so he just made himself some black coffee and sipped it slowly, watching the window grow lighter. With any luck, Techno could sleep for the next few hours and regain some strength, although they still had at least a few more days of fever and coughing. He just hoped he wouldn't have to convince the child every time that he wasn't planning to poison him.

Phil wasn't quite sure how he felt about it all. He was tired, that was for sure. Dazed, to some extent. And upset, but that condition had been with him constantly for about a year and it wasn't a novelty. But beyond all of that, aside from his deep grudge for the world, beyond the memory of his own helplessness and relief that somehow he managed to do it, Phil began to fear.

He could ease the problem for a while, he could find the right words that worked at that moment when Techno was tired, sleepy, and confused - but he had no clue what to do to keep it that way.

He could slowly gain his trust, he could show that he had no evil intentions, he could foster the fragile thread of understanding between them - but he could still only speak for himself.

He could make Techno stop being afraid of him, but the longer he knew the boy, the more clearly he could see that he wouldn't be able to restore his faith in the rest of the world. Not on his own.

He needed the help of a specialist. *Techno* needed the help of a specialist. But convincing him to do so would likely be bloody difficult, if not impossible.

Phil set the empty cup down in the sink, feeling awake and utterly exhausted at the same time. Even so, he trudged up the stairs, pausing for a moment at Wilbur's door, relieved to find that the boy had probably managed to fall asleep again. He hesitated as he passed the Techno's room door, but knew that it would bother him if he didn't know for sure if everything was alright. So even if he had a feeling that he might be reprimanded in the future, he pushed the door open, making sure it wouldn't creak.

The boy looked a little better than half an hour before. He was still sweaty and unnaturally flushed, but he coughed less often, and it certainly didn't sound like he needed a lung transplant urgently. Phil carefully brushed the damp pink wisps from his forehead and pressed a hand against it to make sure the temperature was slowly starting to drop.

Techno made a soft noise, but didn't shift away from the touch, instead moving a little closer.

"Mom..."

Phil froze for a second, hand still to the boy's face and heart somewhere in his throat. He had no idea what to say. He had no idea how to react. Until now, when any of his children had mentioned anything from their past, these were unpleasant and harmful things, even if they themselves sometimes didn't describe them that way. Phil learned to listen, learned to comfort, learned to convince them that whatever happened would never happen again. He learned to explain and wait patiently for the wounds to slowly heal.

But Techno didn't look scared. He didn't look tense, nor stressed, nor hurt. He looked like a longing child, waiting for someone he knew and trusted. Someone who was definitely not Phil.

He couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy for a second.

Then he pulled himself together and, swallowing disappointment, slowly withdrew his palm.

"Hey, Techno," he whispered as the child raised his hand, groping for the suddenly missing source of comfort. "It's just me."

The boy's eyelids trembled and he finally opened his eyes, immediately squinting them in the glare of the lamp. He looked up at him, and for a moment Phil could almost sense his disappointment and confusion. He had expected fear, maybe anger, to come next. Instead, the boy blinked, looked at him more closely again, and his face softened.

"Oh. It's you." It was hard to say if he asked or stated. What was clear was the warmth of his hand when he finally found Phil's fingers and squeezed them tightly, as if afraid he would disappear again somewhere.

Maybe it was because he hadn't expected it. Perhaps because he tried not to imagine the moment in case it never happened. Or maybe as a by product of how many times he had to keep telling himself that even if Techno was never quite convinced of his fatherhood, even if he was never ready for that kind of closeness, it wouldn't change anything and everything would still be fine.

But suddenly Phil felt that he was the one who needed it more, and who felt safer by that.

He didn't release the boy's hand when he fell asleep again. He didn't release it for another five, ten, or even forty minutes. When his second child appeared in the doorway, backpack slung over his shoulder, Phil whispered to him to take the bus to school. Wilbur looked at Techno, his hand even in his sleep clutching the man's hand tightly, and only nodded his head, grinning broadly.

Phil wanted to have at least half of his optimism, because although he would not withdraw his hand first for anything in the world, even if his back was slowly starting to ache from sitting on the floor by the bed, he knew in advance that Techno wouldn't be delighted with this when he woke up.

He wasn't mistaken. An hour later, when he was just halfway through reading another article on his phone that he didn't care about, but at least took time, the boy shifted uneasily, made a low, guttural grunt, and slowly opened his eyes. He looked at Phil, yawned, then looked again, and this time his eyes immediately focused. He froze for a second, two, three, then slowly shifted his gaze to their still clasped hands.

Phil smiled, trying to save the day before it was too late.

"Hey Techno," he whispered, in case a headache joined the symptom list. He purposely didn't even look down, though he could feel the child's gaze almost literally piercing his hand right through. "You can go on sleeping, it's still early. I'll wake you up for breakfast in a few hours, how about that?"

Techno didn't answer. Probably because he didn't care about any breakfast at that particular moment, and he wasn't going to ever fall asleep again, except for perpetual sleep.

"You could go," he croaked, and Phil grimaced. Not at the words themselves, more at how torn and probably sore his throat must have been. He would have offered him the syrup, but he definitely preferred not to abuse the trust that now hung in the balance.

"I didn't want to wake you," he replied honestly. He didn't mention his own selfish interest in building faith in his own parenting abilities, but all the rest was holy truth.

Techno didn't seem to take it that way, given he immediately tore his hand free from his grip, as if the touch suddenly started to hurt him. In a way, it could have been so. Unfortunately, it was the kind of pain Phil didn't know a good cure for.

"You can go *now*," he growled, and immediately began coughing, though briefly and definitely not as frighteningly as at night, but Phil's mind immediately focused on wanting to help. If it weren't for that, the sharp and menacing look might have made him a little more impressed.

"You want me to go?" He made sure, in fact wondering if he would be able to force at least a tea with honey into the child.

Only after a moment as the silence stretched out did he realize that the boy's demeanor had changed; the anger vanished from his face and confusion took its place. He stared at Phil's hand, still lying on the pillow, his own hand pressed tightly against his chest, and as he inhaled, his breath vibrated in his throat in a disturbingly tearful manner.

"I don't know." His voice was weak, trembling, and there was a sense of panic rising in him.

Phil immediately felt a sympathy for him.

"Techno..." he tried, but by some miracle he must have said something wrong already at this stage, because the boy shuddered and pushed as far as possible, pressing his back against the wall.

"Leave me alone," he growled, the crunch of hoarseness in his voice making it sound even less pleasant than usual. "Come on! Piss off!"

Phil frowned. He wasn't sure if it was early in the day or not getting enough sleep, but he really couldn't keep up with the child and didn't understand what the problem was. Which, unfortunately, happened very often, but he had never felt so lost in his reasoning.

"Why are you so angry?" he asked, preferring not to draw the wrong conclusions. The last time he let himself be dismissed without thinking, Techno almost jumped out of the window to test his luck and the tent he had painstakingly accumulated the materials for. He wasn't going to make that mistake again. Not now that they finally had a deal.

Though maybe he shouldn't have called it that. A "deal" implied that both sides were involved - and Techno didn't look like he wanted anything to do with him. Neither with the whole situation, nor even with his own, clearly contradictory feelings.

"Because..." he began, and then stopped, clenching his lips tightly. His chin trembled and his breathing quickened. "Because you confuse me." He sat up, his back against the wall the whole time, pulling his knees up high and resting his forehead on them. However, when Phil instinctively reached out to comfort him, the boy immediately shook him off in a sudden rush of anger. "You're doing it on purpose! You're weird and I never know what you'll do and you pretend to be nice and that you care about me! And you want me to think it's gonna be like that forever, but it's bullshit and you just wait until..."

Phil tried his best to remain calm.

"Until?"

"You're waiting for me to believe you and then..." Techno hands clenched into fists so tightly that his knuckles turned white. "I've seen people like you. I don't want to ever again-" He inhaled loudly. "Go away."

A month ago, Phil would have obeyed the request without a word. Even more! He would have done it yesterday, a few hours ago. But not now. Not after he saw how desperately Techno clung to his hand, how he clung to the touch and how thirsty for any closeness he seemed.

"No," he replied, calmly but more firmly than he had ever dared to before.

In the first second, Techno was just surprised. In the second, a shadow flashed across his face, muscles tensed, and his eyes took on a malevolent expression.

"Get out of here!" This time it was a scream that was definitely going to hurt his throat.

Phil frowned.

"Techno." He didn't have time to say anything specific, because he had to protect himself from the attack.

More precisely, the boy grabbed the closest thing he could reach and threw it at him as hard as I could. Luckily for Phil, the closest thing was Steve, who bounced off his shoulder and slapped back on the mattress.

"I said get out!"

Techno leaned out to pick up the stuffed animal and probably throw it again, but Phil stopped him by grabbing his wrist. He acted reflexively, he certainly didn't grasp it tightly, and almost immediately withdrew his arm, but it was enough for Techno to draw his breath in out loud and hold it for a moment. He stared at him with wide eyes, and Phil could almost feel the thick layer of fear building up some unpleasant, painful satisfaction within him. Like 'I knew it!' screamed at times when you would rather be wrong a hundred times more, but the fact that you were right is the only consolation prize you can count on. It was better than being left with nothing.

"Do something," he encouraged, but though he straightened up and tried to hold his head high, his chin trembled and his arms pressed tightly against his sides, probably to avoid reflexively shielding himself. "Come on!" He shouted, and Phil could have sworn he heard the crack of a mug breaking once more, from a distance of time and space. *"Do something!"*

There was something extremely sad about how he seemed ready to take the blow. With what desperation he even looked for this. Phil couldn't say he understood. He read about it, talked to Puffy, knew the theory behind those emotions, but couldn't honestly say that he had ever felt this way himself. Which definitely didn't make it any easier and made finding the right solution a bit like guessing under which cup the pebble was. In the dark. Under time pressure. And knowing that the pebble had long been in someone's pocket.

But the fact that he did not understand did not absolve him of responsibility. The fact that he had never had such a problem himself didn't make it any less real. And just because something seemed too hard for him didn't mean he could just stop trying.

He slowly raised his hands, and Techno immediately followed them with a shudder.

"I'm sorry." Phil tried his best to keep his voice calm and composed. Which was completely opposite to how he felt. "I shouldn't have done that. I just wanted you to stop throwing it." He waited a moment, though he didn't know what for himself. He certainly wasn't counting on the boy actually believing him. He was not naive. "You really want me to go? I won't force you to do anything," he pointed out in advance, "but I need to know that you *really* want it."

Techno's mouth opened immediately, but no sound came out. He closed them, stared at the space between them for a moment, as if by pure willpower he was trying to increase it, but he no longer looked so confident. He tried to speak again and pursed his lips once more, and Phil could point out the exact moment when something snapped in him, realizing he had no idea what he really wanted. He might have been confident and willing to give orders, but he was certainly not used to the fact that his opinion actually mattered. That his feelings counted. That he mattered.

He inhaled sharply, wrapping his arms around himself, pulling his knees higher, right up to his chin.

"I don't know what I want..." he said quietly, clearly surprised by this himself and stunned by his own surprise. Then, in a low, tearful voice, he added, "*Phil*."

Sometimes in life there were situations when simple, inconspicuous words suddenly took on more meaning. Like when Wilbur looked helplessly over his still-full plate and said softly, "I can't." When he unexpectedly cuddled up to him tightly and whispered, "I remember something." When he asked, "Are you angry?" and he meant, "Say you still love me."

Or when Techno had said his name and there was a request so sincere and desperate that it was impossible not to hear it.

"Hey, come on now." Phil sat down beside him, but made no effort to touch him. Though he really wanted to, watching the boy slide his fingers into his hair and curl them way too tightly. "It's fine now. It's okay if you don't know. Sometimes this," he tried to find the right word, but, annoyingly, nothing came to mind, "is all just too much. But we have time," he assured, and in a moment of brightness he reached to the side where he put the teddy bear down. Techno immediately stretched out his arms, as if afraid that the toy might land anywhere but in his embrace. "You can think about i for as long as you need to. I'll wait."

So they waited. Techno with his face hidden in soft white fur, his shoulders trembling in a silent crying fit, which he was clearly ashamed of but couldn't control, and Phil, repeating the same words over and over again, hoping that some time they would sound differently. Maybe it did. Maybe it was one of them, or all of them, or the mere fact that there was no end to them, but the boy began to calm down. His breathing slowed, his shoulders relaxed, and when he sniffed loudly, lifting his flushed face, there was no trace of anger in his eyes.

"Phil?" His voice was still hoarse, and his words dragged sleepily, but it was the softest tone he'd used in weeks.

Phil wrote it down meticulously in his memory in a special folder for very special memories.

"Hm?"

"Can I stay here?"

"Here? You mean, in your bed?" He made sure. "I'll tell you more, you won't be leaving here for the next few days."

Techno shook his head.

"*Here*," he corrected, and, seeing that it had no effect, he gasped in frustration. "With you," he clarified and immediately looked away. "Because it's been a month. I was counting."

"Oh." Phil wasn't sure how he felt about the boy apparently still marking off the days separating him from his next chance to set up a wild camp as far as possible from him. So he

decided to focus on the question itself, with all its bittersweet undertones. Because Techno had to ask. Because it still wasn't something he just knew. "Yes, I guess it was."

The boy shifted uneasily, peering at him out of the corner of his eye.

"So I can?"

Phil smiled.

"Of course you can," he assured, and then, surprising even himself, he added, "Honestly, I don't even think I could send you back."

Techno just snorted loudly.

"You can always send me back. If they told you you couldn't, that's bullshit," he grunted, and even though he was telling the truth, it still sounded so fucking wrong. As if he was a thing to return to the store if it didn't fit. Phil barely stopped himself from scolding him.

Instead, he silently swore to finally teach him that he must be kinder. To others, but above all to himself.

"No, I don't mean so... formally. Just..."

He tilted his head back, leaning his head against the wall. When he closed his eyes, he was absolutely sure for a second that he was sitting in Wilbur's room. He could imagine a map above the desk, a pile of books on the bedside table, and dirty mugs that magically appeared in the sink afterwards, all at once and none of them washed. He could imagine a few cartons of new puzzles, not even taken out of the foil, and the one favorite, laid out on the floor for perhaps the fourth time a week. He could imagine pictures on the walls, clothes tossed carelessly on a chair, and dust on a bookcase that had supposedly been rubbed off two days ago.

He could imagine that he was sitting next to his son and that all his strength was looking for a way to console him.

There was no sound of the water in the aquarium or the smaller hand gripping his fingers, but apart from that, he couldn't name any difference. He listened to the steady breathing, feeling a familiar source of heat beside his side, perfectly shaped like a small, scared child, and he suddenly realized it didn't matter which room he was in. It doesn't matter which boy it was. Not when both needed him the same, they both required his care and love and ordinary human closeness. And he was always ready to come to their aid. Even if they sometimes called for it quite drastically. Even if he was tired, as he was most of the time for over a year. And frustrated, as always, when he realized there was no simple solution, no shortcuts. And angry because he had to clean up someone else's mess and fix other people's mistakes.

And absolutely sure he wouldn't change what he had for anything else.

He wouldn't trade his children for anything else, because he loved them more than his own life and would sacrifice absolutely everything for them. No matter how many times they



upset him and how much he sometimes felt like packing their bags and sending them to the penal colonies in the farthest corners of the world.

He needed his sons. Both.

He couldn't even think about losing them.

He opened his eyes, trying to get his voice out somehow despite the lump growing in his throat.

"I would miss you too much," he confessed in an unbelievably soft voice. "If you still wanted to run away from us, it would probably break my heart."

It was hard to judge what Techno felt about his confession and whether he understood its seriousness at all. His face remained indifferent, his gaze fixed on some undefined point at the back of the room, and while he was trying hard to look serious, perhaps even a little threatening, the still damp cheeks and arms tightly wrapped around the soft toy revealed something else entirely. So when he grunted, "You really are weak," Phil just smiled.

"I'm nice," he reminded, and Techno hummed in response, neither confirming nor denying it. Maybe simply because he didn't know how to and didn't have the strength to think about it, because immediately after that he yawned straight into the white fur. "Tired?"

"My head hurts." He complained. "And my throat."

Under other circumstances, Phil would probably half-jokingly remind him that his earlier screams might have something to do with his condition. But now he just got out of bed, lifting the edge of the quilt.

"Lie down," he encouraged, and the boy, after a second's reflection and carefully examining whether the number of traps hidden in the mattress had accidentally increased above zero, obediently slipped under the quilt. Phil covered him all the way up to his chin, lovingly watching as the boy made sure that the bear's face was also sticking out above the quilt. He reached for the lamp to turn it off, but hesitated. "Should I sit here with you?"

Techno shook his head.

"No," he replied, which surprised no one at all. What was surprising for a change was that he immediately looked up and added quickly, "but not because I don't like you. Just..."

He clearly couldn't finish the thought, but he didn't have to.

"I know."

And, for the first time this morning, he really did.

# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

New chapter, but it's beted by @SylviaoftheDepths!

Also! I forgot to mention it before because of course I forgot, but I got a fanart! And it's so cute and cool and look, look! :D

<https://twitter.com/loverjoyod/status/1397043999672733696?s=21>

WARNING!!!

CW: sexual abuse

It's just for this chapter, it's briefly mentioned and it's like "false alarm" kinda thing, but! there's a scene that suggest it at first and I don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable.

As soon as Phil was sure that Techno didn't need anything else (he left him a bottle of water and another blanket next to his bed just in case, though the boy only rolled his eyes at it), the fever remained manageable and the best he could do was leave the kid alone, he immediately felt all the tension draining out of him. And with it all the adrenaline that kept him on his feet and upright. No wonder that though he promised himself he only needed a five-minute nap, once he fell on his bed he didn't wake up until late in the afternoon. He reached for the phone to check the time and almost had a heart attack at the thought that he had completely forgotten to pick up Wilbur from school. Immediately afterwards, however, he remembered that the boy was coming home by bus, and calmed down a little. A little. So despite the protest of all his muscles (including some previously unknown to the field of medicine), Phil got out of bed to personally check whether the number of children per square meter in the house was correct.

It was. Even a bit more literally than he had anticipated, because two voices clearly came from the Techno's room.

"Wilbur? Are you here?" Phil knocked on the door and waited a moment before two voices answered him in agreement with a '*Come iiiiin!*'

The boys sat on the bed facing each other in what looked like a nest made of blankets and pillows. Techno apparently felt well enough to expose himself to the bitter cold of the cruel world and change clothes and even take a shower, judging from his wet hair wrapped in a towel turban. It was probably bad for him, actually, but at least he was wearing a bathrobe. Wilbur, by contrast, was drowning in the sheets in exactly the same clothes he'd left for school in the morning, a plate of sandwiches in his lap and a dark smudge on his cheek,

probably jam. When he saw Phil, he hastily wiped it with his sleeve and smiled brightly as he pointed at the desk.

"I made some for you too!"

Indeed, there was another plate on the counter, with Wilbur's traditionally overcooked toast. Not that Phil was going to be picky.

"Thank you." He smiled gratefully, because although he was not particularly hungry himself, the crumbs on Techno pants showed that his appetite was slowly returning. "Good that you thought about it. I completely drifted away."

Wilbur straightened and lifted his chin, clearly pleased that his effort had been appreciated.

"You slept like a rock," he reported. "I slammed the door and you didn't even tell me to be careful. But I didn't mean to slam it," he added quickly.

Phil just shook his head as he walked over to the bed and sat down next to his younger child. Only now did he notice that there were two piles of cards on the covers, and both boys were holding several in their hands.

"What are you playing?" He asked, resting his chin on Wilbur's head so that he could look at his cards. Their number and arrangement told him absolutely nothing.

"Macao."

He raised his eyebrows.

"I'm absolutely sure this is not the way to play it," he assessed, glancing down at the same time as Wilbur looked up. They stared at each other for a moment, exchanging silent accusations and excuses before the boy returned to arranging his cards, this time by color. Which didn't take long considering there were six of them. Suspiciously little compared to the half a deck that Techno could hardly hold in one hand.

"It is." Wilbur decided not to go into constraint. If he was caught red-handed, he would scream it was not his hand. Phil was absolutely sure that if his son tried hard, he could convince anyone that he was seeing his own hand for the first time in his life, someone must have brought it to him, he's not here at all, and it's all a big hallucination. "This is my version."

"Mhm." Phil knew all too well that 'my version' really meant 'I change the rules every five seconds so it always works out for me.' "Sure it is. Techno, do you want to learn to play something where you actually have a chance to win?"

"He has a chance to win!" Wilbur said indignantly, but he didn't know how to play indignant for long, not when Phil had already pulled him onto his lap and started picking up the cards from the sheets. He was too curious for that. "What game?"

Phil hummed thoughtfully as he took a sad mound of cards from Techno and began shuffling them. Perhaps he was just imagining, or he was just seeing what he really wanted to see, but

he couldn't help but feel that the boy looked at them with obvious envy. And then again, as Wilbur rested his back against Phil's chest to find the most comfortable position.

He was neither blind nor stupid enough not to notice that any touch was far beyond the border that he must not cross. Which nobody was allowed to cross, because although Techno could make an exception for Wilbur, it happened sporadically and usually in the few moments when he allowed himself to let his guard down. During evening reading. When they fell asleep on the couch watching a movie. When playing in the garden turned into harmless scuffles and they began to resemble two little bears rolling on the ground. Or like the last time, when after long negotiations, Phil finally got Steve into the washing machine for a long-deserved bath. Techno didn't move from the bathroom, observing the movements of the drum and his imprisoned friend, and he looked so broken and lost that Wilbur (though he laughed a little at him at first) sat down beside him to keep him company in silence. Phil joked that they looked like wives waiting for their husbands to return from the war. Neither laughed. Instead, they both looked at him as if he was trying to tell a joke at a funeral, so he withdrew from the bathroom so as not to spoil an important moment.

But no matter how lovely the moments were, there were still disturbingly few of them. Yes, some people by nature were just less hungry for physical affection than others, Phil was the biggest example of that. But he also took the second, even bigger one, for the fact that Techno was a child. A goddamned abused child. With loads of very unpleasant memories. And just as Wilbur sometimes couldn't bring himself to eat, even if he was damn hungry, Techno too could refuse any physical contact, even if he needed it badly. After all, he had a whole host of reasons to. He could be driven by fear, or sheer caution, or even the absurd belief that he was strong, tough, and utterly self-sufficient. Though, in truth, Phil suspected the boy just didn't understand. That he didn't really know that touch could be normal and nice, and that someone might want to get close to him and not do him any harm.

He sighed inwardly. Why did he always find the saddest option the most likely? And why would he usually have to be right?

Two pairs of eyes stared at him expectantly, so he cleared his throat and tossed the first thing he could think of.

"Poker?"

*Damn it. Bad choice, bad choice...!*

Wilbur wrinkled his nose.

"Isn't that an adult game?"

"Only if you play for money. No, Wilbur, don't even think about it," he added quickly as his son's eyes flashed. "If I find out you're playing with money, I'll take your cards. All of them. The ones you hide between the pillows, too."

The boy sucked in a breath.

"I'm not hiding anything," he argued. "I don't know what you're talking about."

As he pulled the cards from between the blankets, swearing that he had no idea how they got there, Phil shifted his attention to the other child, suspiciously calm and silent.

"How do you feel?" He asked, and Techno immediately looked down, curled his shoulders and wrapped his bathrobe tighter around him, as if he was trying to seem so small he could almost be invisible.

"I'm fine," he muttered, and Phil was relieved to find that he wasn't angry or scared. He was just ashamed. "But my throat hurts."

As if in confirmation, he coughed and although it didn't sound as dramatic as last night and the lungs seemed to be in the right place, a silent threat still hung in the air.

"Mhm." Phil leaned over to put his hand to his forehead just to be sure, and he could have sworn the boy held his breath for a second. Okay, he'd definitely need to focus on that later. "You're still warm." Seeing the child's expression, he quickly added, "But we're just going to wait it out. You warm yourself up well, and then we'll see. But the syrup remains."

"I'm not coughing at all!" He said indignantly, which would have sounded more convincing if every word hadn't been preceded by a cough. Phil just raised an eyebrow and the boy crossed his arms over his chest, making an insulted face. "Okay. *Fine.*"

Surprisingly quick surrender. Which probably meant he was feeling much worse than he said. Or at least that even he was finally bothered by his inability to form a simple sentence without the risk of suffocation. Either way, for whatever reason, he allowed himself to be administered the medicine. Not losing sight of the spoon for a second and wincing dramatically but obediently swallowing the whole thing.

"Well done," Phil praised him, and perhaps because the atmosphere was looser than it has ever been in the past weeks, or maybe because he had Wilbur in his lap, but instinctively he reached out, stopping his hand just above the boy's head at the last moment. "Oh. I'm sorry I didn't..."

Techno frowned as he watched his palm, immediately returning to the safe 'keep your hands to yourself' zone, with an unreadable expression.

"It's alright," he muttered after a moment of awkward silence, and immediately looked away. "You can do it, if you want to so badly."

Phil blinked in complete surprise. He had a very long list of potential reactions prepared, and this one, of course, was not there.

"It doesn't matter what *I* want, Techno," he said quietly when he finally managed to get over his initial shock. "It's your decision."

Techno's hands tightened on the sleeves of his robe, his cheeks turning pink.

"But you *want to*," he noted with emphasis, in a tone that made Phil begin to seriously consider whether or not he would consider 'no' as a rejection.

"I may want a lot of things. It doesn't mean you have to force yourself to do anything."

"Oh Good...!" Wilbur groaned loudly, clearly annoyed that he had fallen out of the limelight for a few minutes, and before anyone could stop him, he leaned from within Phil's embrace, reached for Techno's hair and ruffled it so hard that the towel slipped off and flopped onto the pillow. "Here! Done! Can we play now?"

There was a deep silence for a few seconds. Phil covered his mouth with his hand to suppress a laugh, while he glanced anxiously at Techno, who sat motionless with wet pink wisps sticking to his forehead. Eventually, however, just as Phil was getting ready to intervene somehow, the boy puffed up his cheeks and, reaching back, scooped up the towel to throw it right in Wilbur's face.

"You're stupid," he grunted, but he didn't seem really angry, so Phil slowly relaxed and began to deal the cards while his boys climbed to new heights of creativity in creating new insults. He had absolutely no experience with siblings, but something told him that this kind of taunting was nothing harmful. Or maybe even the opposite.

And he was obviously right, because when he left the kids alone three rounds later to finally start making a late lunch, both boys seemed too busy having fun to even notice his disappearance. In fact, he realized two days later, sitting in the living room with a book, lately they didn't need him very often at all. Not as a conciliator or connector, anyway. Which was nice considering that he suddenly had a lot more free time, but also a little... Well, he didn't want to use the word 'sad', but deep down he had to admit he felt a bit rejected. Not that he missed Wilbur summarizing all his strange thoughts to him, or that he was jealous that Techno was now getting real-time reports of what Dream and Sapnap screwed up this time, but...

Okay, he was a little jealous. In the same weird, selfish way in which he had felt lonely before, when his son finally found himself friends and started spending more time with them than at home. He knew that after a while, when he got used to the change, everything would normalize and the feeling would disappear as suddenly as it appeared, but so far he couldn't help but at least once in a while try to restore the previous state of affairs.

And it didn't comfort him at all when the laughter on the other side of the door stopped immediately as soon as he knocked.

"Yeeeah?" Wilbur stuck his head out through the narrow slit, clearly not planning to invite him in. "What do you want?"

Phil grinned as he picked up the packet of cookies. A little bribe has never killed anyone. Perhaps only his dignity.

"I wanted to see what you're doing," he said, when the boy quickly grabbed sweets, but didn't move an inch. "Can I go in?"

Wilbur shook his head.

"Nope!" He announced far too enthusiastically.

Phil blinked.

"No?"

"We're talking." He lowered his voice a little and leaned forward as if revealing an important secret. "We have very serious matters to discuss."

"Oh. And I can't know about them?"

"No. Only us." He hesitated, glancing deeper into the room, probably looking for Techno's confirmation. "Maybe we'll tell you later."

Phil pursed his lips, trying very hard not to laugh.

"If I'll behave?" He prompted, immediately raising his hands as the child looked at him rebukingly. "Sorry. Serious business, sure. Nothing funny here. I understand."

Apparently he had to find a new hobby.

\* \* \*

He hadn't yet had time to get used to the freedom he had suddenly gained when he got clear proof that brothers will be brothers, but he, too, could be useful at times. And needed, because he didn't even think for a moment that Techno would come to him if he really, really wasn't desperate. And that's exactly what he looked like, standing on Phil's doorstep at two in the morning.

"I had a bad dream," he informed in a low, uncertain voice, quite different from his usual pose. His hand was still on the doorknob, as if he were still considering whether he should turn around and pretend nothing had happened. Or as if he was afraid that he would be sent back with nothing.

Phil rubbed his eyes to wake up a little.

"You want me to come and sit with you?" He asked, and the boy, after a second's thought, nodded. "Okay. Or do you prefer to stay here?"

Techno opened his mouth, then closed it, opened it again and pressed it into a narrow line, frowning. He looked seriously torn, so Phil waited patiently for him to finish his complicated analysis and calculate all the pros and cons. He had to admit, he was surprised when after a long moment the mattress sagged under extra weight. Techno took a seat against the wall, practically squeezing into it with his back and immediately scooping up the entire duvet to wrap himself in a tight cocoon. Phil, willy-nilly, reached for the blanket. Not that he really felt particularly resentful about its loss.

He leaned over the edge of the bed to turn off the lamp and was already opening his mouth to say 'Good night' when somewhere behind he heard:

"But don't try to do anything weird."

He froze for a second, turned on the light again, and very slowly turned around.

"Excuse me?"

Techno's eyes glittered in the pale light just above the edge of the duvet, wide open and alert.

A few months earlier, when Wilbur was going through a phase of intense fascination with animals and expressed it by dividing them into better ones and those worth annihilation, he spent the entire afternoon talking about harmless snakes that were colored like a poisonous species in order to scare off predators. The longer Phil knew Techno, the more he suspected he was witnessing a similar phenomenon.

"I said, don't try anything *weird* ." The duvet muffled the voice a little, but there was still a distinct hint of fear under the harsh tone. "I'll hit you if you try. That's still up."

Ah. So he heard it right after all...

Phil's first reaction was shock.

His second was anger. He was angry, hurt, and fucking indignant because okay, he could have done a lot of objectively bad things in his life, he was definitely not a saint, and he was accused of all sorts of things... but never of anything like that. Never something that made him feel sick at the mere thought, and if anyone else had said it, he would most likely have been slapped in the face.

But it was said by *Techno* . It was said by a little boy who had shown more than once that he'd had the misfortune of meeting the worst people possible in his life, who couldn't stand any touch, who came to him in the middle of the night, and was convinced that he must clearly mark the line that should be obvious and never amenable to any discussion. It was said by *his son* .

So Phil's third reaction was utter horror.

He sat up in bed and the boy flinched, which did not reassure either of them.

"Techno." He had no idea how to start the topic or what words to use so as not to make matters worse, but the prolonged silence was certainly not helping, and the atmosphere was starting to get even less pleasant. "Techno, has anyone ever-"

"No," he interrupted, and for a second Phil felt only overwhelming relief. For a second, before the thought flashed through his mind that there was no certainty that Techno was telling the truth. Considering all his previous behaviors and how introverted and focused on pushing others away he was... With a high degree of probability he could be lying.



"Look, if anything... 'weird' ever happened, you must know that it was absolutely not your fault. Nobody will be mad at you and if-"

Techno stuck his head out from under the covers, leaning on his elbow. He seemed a little reassured, though he was still trying to melt into one with the wall.

"Nothing happened," he said. Then he added, "Not to me," which was much less reassuring. "But I've heard about..." he hesitated, starting to play with his fingers "some stuff. I talk to other kids sometimes, you know? If I have to."

It was still the most disturbing thing Phil had heard in a long time, but this time, at least he was able to believe the boy. Which wasn't much of a consolation, but he still felt as if five years of his life had been returned from the twenty that was previously taken.

"Okay," he sighed heavily, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He was wide awake now and pure adrenaline was racing through his veins, but his mind still felt as though it were a thick fog. "Okay, that's... No, wait. I don't want to say 'that's good' because it's *not*." He sighed again, this time just struck by his own uselessness, and looked at the boy, who was winding strands of hair around his fingers as if he hadn't just started a heart attack. "But I'm really glad no one hurt you."

Techno nodded.

"Yhm. And I'm about to keep it that way," he remarked seriously and despite all the awareness that he probably had no evil intentions and didn't mean to imply anything, and the topic itself was just damn delicate - Phil felt offended anyway.

"You really think-"

"No." Techno cut him short for the second time. And, also for the second time, it relaxed the atmosphere a bit. "I wouldn't come here if I thought so." He made a face at him that looked a lot like it was saying, 'Do I look like I'm stupid?'. "It's just a warning." He shrugged and, wrapping himself back in the quilt, turned to face the wall. "And Wilbur would tell me if you were like that."

Phil didn't fall asleep that night. In fact, he wasn't sure if he would ever get to sleep again in his life. He really didn't dream of anything other than turning back time and not hearing any of those things, and at the same time he despised himself for wanting it because, damn it, that was what his job was about! He was supposed to look after these children, and he should be grateful that they even wanted to confide in him about their problems and worries, especially Techno! Even if these were difficult, irritable matters that deprived him of the last of his strength to live. Nobody said it would be easy. On the contrary.

As if to confirm, Techno glanced at him during breakfast, momentarily pausing his racing with himself at devouring eggs.

"You look like shit," he said, and Phil couldn't even be outraged about it. It wasn't an insult, it was a statement of fact.

He sighed heavily, reaching for his coffee. Nothing else was passing his throat.

"Thank you, Techno."

The boy shrugged.

"I'm just saying."

Phil was sincerely tempted to say that his words were the source of the problem, but he bit his tongue. He shouldn't pass on his own frustration on the children. Even if one of them nearly killed him in an extremely brutal way, and then as if nothing had happened, immediately fell asleep.

Wilbur looked up from his plate. He had an exceptionally good appetite today, which was the only source of a little joy so far.

"You couldn't sleep?" He asked, clearly concerned.

Phil just nodded, pouring caffeine into himself in amounts that were surely not meant to be good for his health. Techno looked at him again.

"Why?"

Looking at it objectively, he probably had no bad intention. But Phil couldn't help seeing him at that moment as a serial killer, stabbing another victim and asking in surprise why they were dying.

"Because you scared me to death, kid," he grunted, scowling at him before he could stop himself.

And while Techno didn't care a bit about it, Wilbur sucked in a loud breath and turned to the other boy, genuinely indignant.

"You promised you wouldn't be mean anymore!"

"I wasn't mean! I just warned him not to try anything-"

"He wasn't mean," Phil interjected, bearing in mind that Techno wasn't really good with words. And he really didn't want to have to explain to his younger son why any accusations had been made in the first place. "Techno just... He asked something."

Wilbur, of course, was not satisfied with the answer.

"About what?"

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his temples. He was already feeling a headache. He reached for the mug and finished the last of his coffee, feeling the two pairs of expectant eyes on him.

"Do you remember what we talked about the other day?" He began, which, on reflection, was actually not very specific, and Wilbur rightly rolled his eyes.

"We talk a lot, Phil."

"Fact. But we talked about... good and bad touch. Do you remember?" He added, though he was absolutely sure Wilbur remembered. Or at least he hoped so.

Indeed, the boy immediately lost all enthusiasm and pressed his back harder against the back of the chair.

"Oh. Yeah, I do," He glanced sympathetically at Techno, but he only raised an eyebrow.

"What's a 'good touch'?"

Phil sighed once more. He needed more coffee.

"You see, I mentioned two things and you're surprised by the one that should be normal. And that's why I couldn't sleep."

The boys exchanged glances. Techno frowned, but Wilbur just shrugged to show that he was lost too.

"I don't understand," he confirmed a moment later.

"It's stupid," Techno muttered at the same time, placing his arms on the table and resting his chin on them. "You're talking nonsense."

In a way, he was right. Explaining anything to him was like describing to a blind man what colors looked like. Or worse, because at least the colors never hurt anyone, which, unfortunately, was impossible to say about the boy's experiences with physical contact. Phil couldn't say that he knew what it was like, fostering made him realize how lucky he had been to grow up in a normal, healthy home, but he had the empathy enough to understand and not try to force dry facts into his head.

Not when it was much easier to show him.

He got up from the table, gesturing for the boys to do the same. They obeyed, though reluctantly, Wilbur mostly because of the half-eaten toast he tried to quickly cram into his mouth, Techno with the look of a man who was not sure what he did wrong but predicted a poor end to it.

"Wilbur." Phil sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to him encouragingly. The boy, still chewing on the excess bread, immediately accepted the invitation. "Turn around, okay? Back to me. Thank you. Remember when we played this?" He ran his fingers between the baby's shoulder blades to give him an additional hint.

Wilbur beamed in an instant.

"Yes! I remember!" He pulled his legs up onto the mattress to make himself a little more comfortable, straightening himself up to make more 'work' space. "I've always won."

Phil smiled, keeping the information to himself that, in truth, he wasn't winning. While over time, with a lot of work and regular exercise, Wilbur made up for everything he couldn't quite catch before, at the very beginning, he was absolutely hopeless in spelling and made mistakes at every step, which usually made him guess wrong. Phil just let him believe he was right. In hindsight, he might actually pamper him a little too much and not teach him enough how to deal with failures... but he just couldn't say no to him.

"Yellow!" He guessed as soon as Phil tapped him between the shoulder blades to signal that he was done. "It was easy."

"You're just good at it."

The boy grinned broadly, clearly proud of himself, then squealed in surprise as he tried to dodge the hand ruffling his hair. Phil laughed at his indignation but quickly stopped, shifting his attention to the other child in the room.

"Want to try too?"

Techno, watching the scene with increasing disorientation, winced and took a step back.

"What's this all about?" He grunted, shifting his gaze from Phil to Wilbur, finally keeping it on the hand still resting on the boy's back. He seemed more curious than concerned, but Phil decided to be a little more careful and not rush anything anyway. Small, slow steps, one by one...

"You have to guess the word." Wilbur explained the rules. "Phil will write something on your back and you have to guess what it was."

Techno frowned.

"Write?" He repeated skeptically. "But... it doesn't hurt, right?" He said, hesitating a little closer, as if he still expected a trick.

Wilbur shook his head.

"No. It's nice."

Phil gave him a grateful smile. At times he wondered if, without the help of his first child, he would have been able to gain even a small amount of the trust of his second one. The honest answer was no, which was bloody depressing on one hand and reassured him on the other that destiny sometimes worked in weird, unpredictable ways.

"If something's wrong, just say so and I'll stop immediately," he added, so as not to leave any room for doubt.

It was hard to judge whether Techno believed him or his curiosity finally got the better of his instinct, but as Wilbur shifted to make room for him, the boy slowly slipped into the gap. He

sat on the very edge of the mattress, more sideways than completely leaving his back to Phil, probably so that he could keep an eye on him and notice any evil intentions in time. But still - he was here, willingly, and brushed his hair over shoulder without being asked.

Phil could sense how tense he was even before he brought a hand to his back, even more so how the touch itself definitely didn't help either. Techno sucked in a breath and straightened like a string, but surprisingly didn't pull away. His fingers just tightened on the slightly bobbing leg and he held his breath as Phil ran his finger slowly between his shoulders.

Wilbur, watching them from under raised eyebrows, rolled his eyes.

"But *I'm* the dramatic one," he muttered, collapsing between the pillows.

Surprisingly, it actually lightened the atmosphere. Techno huffed, making a face at him, but the corners of his mouth twitched slightly. Phil, by contrast, made no attempt to hide his amusement.

"You can breathe, you know?" He asked, and the boy exhaled immediately. Just a puff of his cheeks.

"It's 'cause it's weird," he grunted, as if someone really needed an explanation from him. "And stupid. And it tickles and... 'Crow'," he blurted instantly as Phil ran his fingers down his spine.

"No." He shook his head, though, to tell the truth, that was what he was actually writing. But he couldn't help but tease the boy a little. And, perhaps, along the way, teach him to not follow his first thought without even thinking. "A little patience."

Techno frowned, and while he still didn't seem quite convinced, his competitive spirit began to emerge. He always took all the games very seriously. This one, clearly, was not an exception.

This time he waited patiently for Phil to tap him between the shoulder blades to signal that he was done.

"'Crown'," he guessed, and smiled triumphantly at the confirmation. He pulled his legs up onto the mattress, sitting cross-legged, slightly more comfortable and, more importantly, much closer. "Again. Something difficult."

It was impossible to say that, at any point, Techno had experienced a deep enlightenment, understood that he was in absolutely no danger, and was immediately used to physical proximity. But with each word he relaxed a little more, his breathing evened out, and in the end he was more absorbed in talking to Wilbur than guessing anything. But when Phil withdrew his hand, he immediately looked back.

"You stopped," he remarked, and it sounded like the accusation of an unspeakably terrible crime.

"I thought you were talking."

"We're talking," he admitted, his expression hinting at no connection at all. "But I didn't tell you to stop."

However, as far as the talks were concerned, Phil had absolutely no intention of keeping silent and pretending nothing happened. Partly because it was a damn vital issue and he would never forgive himself if Techno had any doubts that his body belonged to him and no one had the right to invade his space in any way without express consent. And also in part because another heart attack could turn out to be very real and very deadly for him.

So as Wilbur ran upstairs to feed Milo, Phil cleared his throat to catch the older boy's attention and nodded toward the stairs.

"Come with me," he asked, and noted with satisfaction that although Techno hesitated, he made no attempt to object.

He looked a bit concerned as he followed him down the hall, and he didn't feel relieved when Phil opened the office door for him and gestured him to one of the chairs by the desk.

"I didn't do anything," he said immediately, pushing his chair a little further than necessary. But he was still here, still trusting him enough to be alone in a locked room with him - something unthinkable a week ago.

Phil was absolutely sure that at the moment the bar of his expectations wasn't so much on the ground as six meters below it, but frankly he didn't care.

"You didn't do anything," he confirmed, the boy's shoulders visibly relaxing. "I just want to talk. But it's very important, so you have to listen very carefully, okay?"

Techno, for once, actually listened. He sat still, legs tucked up to his chin, and though his face was blank and his expression almost bored, his gaze was sharp and attentive.

"This is stupid," he muttered suddenly as Phil finished lecturing that no, calling the beating a more fancy name did not suddenly make it a good parental method or just anything less than pure violence. "You tell me this as if I could do something about it. And I had any say."

It was sad to hear how confident he was about his helplessness. Even worse - to know he was right.

Phil leaned forward a bit in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees so that their faces were level with the same height.

"I'm telling you this so that you remember that it wasn't and never will be your fault."

The boy grimaced at him with a mixture of disbelief and irritation.

"Of course not," he snorted, and while Phil wished he had used a different tone, it was still good to know his children remembered it. Or at least one of them. "Why would I think that?"

Phil hesitated, not wanting Techno to think they were hiding something from him, and trying not to get his other son involved at the same time. Even if the boys were similar in many

ways, and they certainly shared many unpleasant experiences, he didn't want them to think he was comparing them in that respect or judging who had it worse and why. Besides, while he was absolutely sure they were talking about it among themselves, it didn't give him the right to discuss one's problem with the other.

His inner fear turned out to be completely unnecessary, because understanding appeared on Techno's face.

"Wilbur thought so?" He made sure, his eyes darkening.

Phil exhaled slowly.

"Wilbur was..." he tried to find words general enough not to reveal too much "very used to a lot of bad things."

"Oh." He clenched his hands into fists, his voice vibrating with a sudden rush of anger. "They trained him."

"I'd rather not call it that... but yes. They did."

"Fucking assholes," he muttered, and Phil had already opened his mouth to scold him for it, but after a second's thought, he decided he couldn't find the motivation for it.

"Okay, I'll pretend I didn't hear that. As an exceptional," he added emphatically, and though the boy still looked ready to give someone a good beating, he smiled slightly in response. Phil used this to change the subject. "Techno? If something bad happens, I want you to know that you can always tell me about it, okay? I know it can be hard at times, you may be ashamed of something, or you may be afraid I'm gonna be angry, but I'm here to help you."

Techno stopped smiling almost immediately, and at 'you can tell me,' a shadow flashed across his face, and he grimaced and pressed his back harder against the back of the chair, sliding down on it a little lower.

"You wouldn't believe me," he said, almost indifferently. "Why would I tell you if you wouldn't believe me anyway?"

Phil blinked, taken aback by such a sudden directness.

"Of course I would. Why would I not?"

Techno gasped irritably, swinging his legs, mostly to kick the chair leg and vent some of his anger.

"Because I'm a stupid kid and I'm definitely making things up again," he said dryly, and even though Phil had long been used to his kids finding new ways to break his heart like no one else, he still winced. "Adults never believe. Once someone came to check if the house was okay and I said it's not. Cause it wasn't," he added, as if there was any doubt about it. "And they said I could tell them everything, but then they repeated everything I said to my..." he grimaced, "to my 'parents'. And it was even worse then and they just beat me more."

If Phil had regained even a minimum of liking for Nate in the past two months, it was going straight to hell now. He knew that this particular employee probably had absolutely nothing to do with it, but someone had to get hit for the sins of the system, and Nate was the closest.

He slipped off the chair, crouching in front of the boy, patiently bearing his sharp, unfavorable gaze.

"Techno. I promise I will always believe you," he said, perhaps a little too solemnly, but the fact of the matter was that hesitation appeared on the child's face. "No matter what."

For the next few seconds they were both silent, Techno nibbling the thread on a sleeve of his T-shirt, Phil watching his movements with mounting anxiety. He only breathed a breath when the boy finally shrugged.

"Okay." He muttered, still not looking at him. "You've never lied, I guess. Yet," he added immediately, but probably more out of habit and for decoration.

"And I'm not going to," he assured, then smiled, wanting to end the conversation in a slightly more pleasant tone. "You know when else I'm not lying? When I say you're very clever and damn smart and you're one of the last people who deserve to be called 'stupid'."

Techno didn't respond, pressing his lips tightly together and turning his head to hide behind his hair. But the tips of his ears turned red and he looked pleased.

Phil couldn't help but be happy about it.



# Chapter 32

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clearly, peace was never an option, because although the next few days passed in a surprisingly good atmosphere, Phil received a call from the school in mid-November saying that his sons had a fight.

"With *each other* ?" Was the first thing he asked, and he was relieved to hear the denial. "Oh, thank God!"

He immediately realized that he had made a serious mistake and shouldn't have said it aloud, but it was too late, the silence on the other side of the receiver expressed more than any words and he could only mumble a silent "I'm sorry" and promise to be there as fast as you can.

But at least his boys didn't suddenly jump at each other's throats! They apparently terrorized the other students, but they did it *together* . Like friends. Like *brothers* !

Sometimes he still couldn't believe what desperation was doing to a man...

The last time he had the pleasure of showing up at school as the devil's advocate, Techno was sitting alone outside the office, trying to pretend he didn't care how much trouble he got into or what happened to him next. This time, there were more children and most of them weren't Phil's. Always a nice change.

Wilbur was the first to look up at the sound of footsteps echoing down the empty corridor. He had disheveled hair, a red smudge on his cheek, and pieces of handkerchief stuffed into an apparently bleeding nose. His shirt hung sadly from one shoulder, torn and crumpled, as if he were rolling on the floor in it, which was probably a much more accurate comparison than it should have been. He looked so pathetic that Phil forgot immediately that he should be angry with him, and all he thought was about grabbing him into his arms, taking him home and never letting him go again. And maybe he would even have done it if at that very moment the boy hadn't made the most defiant face he had ever seen on him, one of those saying, 'Whatever you do, I won't admit anything.' Which was really not in his style.

And no, Phil wasn't a blind parent who believed his child was the embodiment of virtue and goodness. He could pamper his son and give him more privileges than he probably should, but he knew full well that he wasn't raising a little angel. Wilbur was just damn sly and he could play the role of the most battered, defenseless creature on cue that had ever walked in the world - because he knew Phil would fall for it. Every time. The fact that he hadn't taken advantage of it now was... at least puzzling.

In contrast, Techno, who was sitting next to him, didn't even glance at Phil, too busy staring at his own shoes. Compared to the other boy, he looked surprisingly well. At worst he could

have had a little more disheveled hair, though that was a moot point. No bruises, no abrasions, no signs of anything to do with any scratching at all.

Phil understood less and less of it, and he disliked it very much. He liked even less that the other three children gathered in front of the office were at least a head taller than his own. If that was what the opposing team was, he was surprised his sons had survived at all.

He knew he should say something. Preferably in a very strict tone and at least trying to look mad. But somehow he didn't know how to go about it when one child completely ignored him, and the other apparently entered some phase of rebellion out of nowhere, so he just sighed heavily and sat down in the chair next to them, waiting for someone to invite them into his office.

"Your sons were in a fight." He heard five minutes later as he just sat down in one of the three prepared chairs, Techno and Wilbur on either sides of him.

He nodded, waiting for some further development, but apparently in the headmaster's opinion the topic was exhausted.

"I had time to notice," he said bitterly, addressing his children for the first time, "Boys? What was it about?"

They were both silent. Surprisingly, they could be amazingly in tune just when they shouldn't. Apparently it wasn't the first time today, because the man sitting on the other side of the large desk just shook his head.

"In fact, I was hoping they might get a little more chatty with you," he said, and Phil couldn't help feeling that he had just been rated as a parent. And that he didn't get the highest grade. "The other three boys agree that Wilbur attacked them for no reason."

The said boy slumped a little lower in his chair, suddenly much less confident. Phil blinked.

"Wilbur?" He made sure, just in case, pointing his finger at the child.

He felt bloody guilty immediately. Was he a bad father if he assumed Techno was the main culprit? Is this a sign that he favors one of the children? But Techno just was the more obvious choice, with all his humor and irritability and sudden mood swings...

Oh my god, he favored Wilbur. He totally favored Wilbur. Damn, he was a hopeless father. He was a hopeless father, and now he would have to sit and listen to a stranger tell him this, perhaps indirectly and under the guise of "breaking the school rules" crap, but that was certainly what he meant.

He looked at Techno, whom he apparently liked less for some reason, and then at Wilbur, whom he apparently didn't know at all. He just wanted to grab them both and go home. Was there any way to speed it up? The opposing team must have been dying impatiently to get their five-minute audience as well.

He frowned. He recalled the three tall, probably older boys in his mind once more and glanced at Wilbur for comparison.

"Are we talking about the boys I saw outside the office?" He made sure, probably interrupting some monologue, because the headmaster gave him an unfavorable look.

"Exactly."

Oh.

Oh, it changed the form of things.

He straightened, crossing his arms over his chest, feeling a sudden surge of energy and will to fight.

"With all due respect, that doesn't sound like something Wilbur would do."

After a little while, he realized that he might have used different words. Those that don't sound like absolutely every parent of incarnate devils defending their "little angels". He wanted to sigh at his stupidity, but luckily the Headmaster had already done it for him.

"Mr. Watson, ' he began in a tone that betrayed that he had had conversations like this far too many times, "one of the teachers saw the whole incident and they confirms that-"

Phil just shook his head.

"You don't understand. I'm not saying it didn't happen," he said emphatically, so that at least at this point, he would look like someone with the remnants of objectivity. "Wilbur is far from innocent," he glanced at his child once more, with his torn clothes and still dirty cheek. "But he's even further from being a complete idiot. Starting a one-in-three fight? With opponents twice as large?" He shook his head. "My son is not a suicidal. He must have had a really good reason."

There was silence in the room for a few seconds. Phil could clearly hear the ticking of a clock on one of the walls, and see clearly as with each soft pop from Wilbur's face all the hardness faded, and panic slowly crept in his eyes. He could be a great actor whenever he wanted to, but he was never good at acting under pressure. He was even worse at hiding anything and it was only a matter of time until he broke, most likely in a very dramatic way.

As it turned out, they didn't even have to wait, because it was Techno who spoke first.

"It's my fault," he muttered, winding strands of hair around his fingers. He still didn't look at Phil, instead he was very interested in the pattern on the panels.

"No it's not!" Wilbur jumped in his chair, leaning out to see the other boy. "They started it!" He looked at Phil, suddenly very determined. "They were laughing at him! They laughed at his hair and called him 'dirty' and said..." He broke off suddenly and glanced at Techno as if waiting for permission to go on, but the latter only glared at him warningly.

"I don't care what they said," he grunted, his fingers clasped on the edge of the chair. Phil caught the urge to reach for his hands, but quickly dismissed the idea. "And you're a moron to worry about it."

Wilbur breathed out in indignation.

"I won't just stand and watch when they insult you!"

"Nobody asked you for help."

"I asked myself!"

"So now you can go and-" Techno finally looked up, showing his face hardened with anger, but then he took a deep breath, clearly trying to force himself to remain calm.

Regardless of the circumstances, Phil was really proud of him on actually trying to better control his emotions. Even if with varying degrees of success. As a support, he carefully placed a hand on his back, stroking up and down in a slow, reassuring gesture.

Apparently, he had actually done something right once 'cause the boy held his breath for a moment, and when he let it out, some of his anger seemed to be escaping with the air.

He glanced over his shoulder at Phil's hand, at himself, at Wilbur, and became interested in his shoes again.

"They said no wonder no one ever wanted me," he said softly, in an empty, almost bored voice that had nothing to do with the emotion the words immediately aroused in Phil. "And Wilbur got mad and pounced on them. He literally jumped them!" He straightened and pointed at the other boy, seeming to be saying, 'Look at that idiot.' "Head first! He don't know shit about fighting, Phil!" Here he looked at the guardian with such indignation as if it was the norm that every loving parent would prepare their ten-year-old son for fights in the ring.

"I know how to fight!" Wilbur's voice turned to a squeak as it always did when he was too emotional, but Techno didn't make the slightest impression.

"You don't know shit," he growled, then the two, almost synchronously, crossed their arms and slumped heavily on the backs of their chairs, ostentatiously turning away from each other.

Phil glanced at one, then the other, torn internally between frustration and some twisted form of affection.

"Okay, here's what we do." He reached into his pocket for the keys and, after a second of hesitation, handed them to Techno, whom for the moment seemed a safer choice. "Wait for me in the car. And I want it to be in one piece when I come over to you, okay?"

Wilbur made a hollow grunt that was probably supposed to signify agreement. Techno just nodded.

Phil sighed heavily as he pulled himself together. God knows he hated confrontation.

But for his children, he could have made an exception.

\* \* \*

When a quarter of an hour later he sank heavily into the driver's seat, the two boys looked much calmer and most likely reconciled, judging from how close they were sitting and how they exchanged knowing glances as soon as he glanced at them in the mirror.

"You'll both stay after school. For a week", he said, and he raised his hand as Wilbur was already getting ready for a long moan about the injustice and brutality of the world. "And I don't want to hear a single word about it, because if I hadn't started threaten about hiring a lawyer and filing a lawsuit, you'd be suspended."

Wilbur obediently closed his mouth, choosing his life rightly. Techno frowned.

"You really did that?" He asks, and Phil closed his eyes for a moment, turning the key in the ignition.

"I got angry," he sighed.

It must have sounded really as if he was close to a nervous breakdown, because neither of the children said a word the rest of the way. Not for him, anyway. Every now and then they whispered in each other's ear and made expressions that must have had some deeply hidden meaning, but all Phil saw were two boys fooling around.

His boys. Who have apparently passed the state of being able to argue and defy, and a second later unite against him.

It was surprising how much he enjoyed the thought.

But he tried to remember that this moment of happiness had paid off with a good hour of stress, so as soon as they entered the house and took off their shoes, he immediately showed them the way to the couch, going to the kitchen to get the first aid kit himself.

Fortunately, Wilbur's nose was only slightly bruised, so it ended up with a few slices, more for peace of mind than for real need.

"Who wants to say something?" He asked, taking his seat in the armchair and looking from one to the other.

Wilbur raised his hand.

"I'm not sorry at all and I would do it again."

Well. Phil appreciated honesty.

"Techno?" He tried his luck with the second child, but he only ruffled and reached for the pillow, wrapping his arms tightly around it.

"I didn't want to fight anyone. But Wilbur had already started, and... I didn't want him to be made into a pulp."

"I can fight!" The boy exclaimed in the same squeaky tone as before. And, as before, no one was impressed. "I can fight and I don't care that they were bigger! I'd do it again and a thousand times and if you hadn't joined, I'd have won! I can fight and-!" He broke off, jumping up and down in fear as Techno with a loud 'Bu!' prodded his shoulder. "Not fair! I wasn't prepared! Phil, tell him it doesn't count!"

Phil, watching them scuffle with the growing belief that he had failed as a parent on the one hand and that he had done his job perfectly on the other, shook his head.

"Sorry, Wilbur, I agree with Techno. But!" He added immediately when a triumphant smile appeared on Techno's face. "Wilbur's right too. You shouldn't let them offend you. It's good that you don't take it personally, but sometimes... Sometimes someone just doesn't deserve to get away with it. Therefore, I don't approve of the method, but I'm happy that you are standing up for yourself. Just tell one of the teachers next time, okay?"

"Teachers are useless," Techno muttered, and although Phil knew he shouldn't say it out loud, he silently agreed.

"Okay. Come to me then."

"And what are you gonna do?"

Phil was getting ready to say one of the standard phrases, something about talking to the management, other kids' parents, and anything else he remembered from school. Then he remembered that neither of them ever worked. In fact, most of them only made matters worse.

"You know that you are both technically orphans?" So he asked instead. Both boys looked at him in amazement, Wilbur wide-eyed, Techno under frowning brow. Phil leaned in, lowering his voice a little as if revealing a secret. "Bullying little, defenseless orphans sounds like something that influences the opinion of the school very badly. It would be a shame if someone started spreading about it left and right, wouldn't it? Someone who works on the internet and knows a lot of people who owe him a favor..."

Techno moved away from him, looking as if he wasn't entirely sure if he admired him more or was afraid of falling victim to him. Wilbur caught the idea immediately.

"I have asthma," he added in that same low voice, grinning. "Poor, defenseless, ill orphans."

Techno looked from one to the other.

"I thought we were the good guys," he muttered into the pillow. Phil smiled at him.

"We are. We are very good at taking care of the family's interests. Ah, but when we are at the methods. Wilbur." He took his son's face in both hands, briefly touching their foreheads to each other. "I love you more than life, you're bloody smart and you have many talents. But fighting isn't one of them. Please stop being so self-destructive."

Wilbur made an incomprehensible grunt, but for a moment his fingers tightened in silent agreement. Which he would probably forget in a few days, but better than nothing.

Techno, if possible, stared at them even more incredulously than before, but made no comment.

"Are we in trouble?" He just asked, resting his chin on the edge of the pillow.

Wilbur slapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't remind him!" He hissed.

Phil felt himself smiling involuntarily. Parenting could be bloody exhausting, but sometimes, looking at his kids, he realized it was definitely worth it.

"School has already done that, and I'm not a fan of punishing twice for the same thing. Which doesn't mean I'm not mad at you," he added quickly as Wilbur beamed at him. He was definitely going to be in a much worse mood having stayed at school for the next few days, but for the time being, he looked downright indecently pleased.

Techno frowned.

"You don't look like you're mad," he said, and at first Phil wanted to laugh. But then he realized that the boy wasn't saying it in a joking way or teasing him - he was just actually used to people showing emotions in a much more... intense way.

"I can start if you want so much," he replied, trying to turn the situation into a joke anyway. It was hard to judge with what effect, because the boy hid most of his face in the pillow again. "Okay, both upstairs. And I don't want to hear you until lunch."

He watched them as they climbed the stairs, Wilbur in front, tugging on Techno's wrist, who exceptionally didn't protest or shy away from his touch.

"I can teach you to fight," he suggested. "So that you wouldn't be so stupid anymore and get beaten like a moron."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment. Just in case, he decided not to hide the first aid kit.

Why the fuck is it so hot here?! My brain is turning into boiling soup...

Anyway, Happy Pride!  (in the middle of june)



# Chapter 33

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil wasn't entirely sure at what point it had become a completely redundant accessory in his own home. Somewhere in the process of bonding between the boys, his presence simply ceased to be necessary and he was relegated to the role of calling them for dinner and reminding them to do homework. Thinking logically, he was absolutely sure that this was a perfectly normal and largely transitory state - his boys for the first time had someone who understood everything they went through, so it's no wonder that once they started to trust each other, they immediately became inseparable. After the first shock is over, things will normalize and become a little more stable. But that didn't change the fact that Phil felt a little spurned right now.

Was he happy that his children got along so well? Of course. Was it irritating him that the conversation would immediately stop as soon as he came into the room, and the boys exchanged meaningful glances, seeming to say, "Why is he here?". Yes, definitely.

But on the other hand, he really couldn't have been happier, even if the happiness had a slightly bitter aftertaste.

"I forgot my book," Wilbur complained as he finished throwing the entire contents of the backpack onto the seat.

Techno and Dream, occupying two adjacent seats in the car, let out a collective groan. Phil just drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. In fact, he was in no hurry, but the longer he stayed with his children's friend, the more he became convinced that he didn't like him. Not that he had anything against him... but his kids deserved better friends. Sapnap burned their beds, but at least he said "Good morning." Quackity was loud and had the stupidest ideas, but always apologized when he actually messed up. And Karl. Karl was nice. Why wasn't it his Wilbur who kept inviting to dinner?

"Can't you pick it up tomorrow?" He asked, though he knew the answer in advance and wasn't surprised when the boy shook his head.

"I need it," he announced, and he was already one foot out.

"Goood..." Dream groaned dramatically as soon as the door closed behind him. And then, much more quietly, probably so Phil wouldn't hear, he added, "He's so annoying sometimes."

Unfortunately for him, Phil heard and was about to turn around and remind him that the ride proposal could be withdrawn at any moment and there was no reason for the kid to force himself to spend time with such 'annoying' people. Before one could say anything, Techno hit Dream on the shoulder.

"Don't talk about my brother like that," he grunted when his friend looked at him with resentment. "Only I can do this."

Dream blew up, crossing his arms over his chest and pressing his back harder into the seat. Phil couldn't remember the last time he was smiling as broadly as he was then, glancing at his son in the rearview mirror.

Two days later, when Phil went down to the living room, stiffened from several hours of computer work, he was greeted by the sight of two boys occupying the couch. The television played softly in the background, but neither of them paid the slightest attention to it. Techno's eyes were closed and he looked as relaxed as he had never been before, while Wilbur carefully and slowly but surely tried to brush through his wet hair.

"Yeeez, you never brush it?"

Techno shrugged. Neither of them noticed Phil standing halfway up the stairs.

"Sometimes."

"Then do it more often." He put down the comb, starting to untangle the largest tangle with his fingers. "But I like how long they are. I can braid them for you if you want."

"How comes you know how?"

"I had sisters in my previous house. They weren't nice, but they liked it when I braided their hairs. And then they would leave me alone for a while."

Techno hummed understandingly.

"One of my 'sisters' tried to kill me once," he confessed suddenly, and Phil nearly slid his foot off the step, his eyes opening in mute shock.

Wilbur, on the other hand, didn't seem the least bit surprised.

"Yhm. They do that."

Techno wrinkled his nose.

"For fun?"

"Girls are weird." He withdrew his hands, regarding his handiwork appreciatively, and reached for the comb again. His movements were very gentle and would probably take ages for him to do so, but he didn't seem to have a problem with it. He was silent for a few seconds, then, "I'm sorry."

The other boy opened his eyes, turning his head toward him.

"Why?"

"Your hands." Wilbur's voice was much less sure than usual, low and full of sincere sympathy. "Looks like it hurts a lot. I'm sorry, really."

Techno moved restlessly, pressing his hands tighter to his sides and pulling the short sleeves of his shirt a little tighter.

"Don't be. I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity. I have scars myself, you know?" He leaned out, putting all his weight on his brother's back, resting his chin on top of his head and raising his forearm to his eye level to demonstrate one of the old faded marks. Techno just huffed in displeasure, but did nothing to push him away. "And Phil too. He'll never admit it, but I know he doesn't like them. They remind him of something sad."

Phil blinked at the remark by surprise. Not that he hadn't realized his son was so damn smart (when he want to be) and probably understood more than expected, but it still amazed him sometimes.

As quietly as he could, he returned up the stairs, waited a few seconds, and then descended again, this time making sure to make more noise. As expected, the boys immediately fell silent and raised their heads. Wilbur grinned broadly.

"I'm making a braid," he informed, clearly expecting praise, so Phil leaned over him, kissing the top of his head.

"Very nicely. Do you want me to help?"

"No." The boy shook his head, speaking for both of them, as Techno was busy fiddling with his fingers and sneaking a glance at Phil when he thought he couldn't see. There was something unusual about his gaze, some kind of anger and sadness, but before Phil could decode them, the boy bowed his head, hiding behind his hair.

"If you'd like I could take you to the hairdresser," Phil suggested, watching Wilbur pick up the pink strands and split them into three groups. "You don't have to cut them," he added quickly. "But it could use a little trim, especially the fringe. And we could try to do something with that color."

Wilbur's hands froze for a moment.

"But pink works for him," he protested.

"It's true. But if they are going to be dyed somebody need to get it right."

Techno began to flex his fingers with such force and at such angles that the risk of bone breakage skyrocketed.

"Wilbur says you cut his hair yourself," he blurted out suddenly.

Phil wasn't sure if it was an allegation or a fear that his own hair might end up in such irresponsible hands as well.

"Yhm. But I'd rather not try with yours, 'he reassured, handing the elastic to the table so Wilbur could finish the braid. "It's a much bigger challenge."

For some reason, Techno seemed upset. Or disappointed. Or both. In any case, he certainly didn't like something, because he didn't say a word to Phil for the rest of the day and avoided him as much as possible, and in the evening, when Phil came to read to him, he turned over and pretended that he was already asleep.

It wasn't the first time, nor was it the last, and overall it was still an advance in expressing negative emotions. But that didn't mean it hurt less.

Sometimes Phil just didn't understand. Sometimes he meant well and only made matters worse.

Sometimes he thought maybe he should stop trying and accept that he was no longer needed.

\* \* \*

He was needed. He was definitely needed, if only to stop the chaos in time and save the world before it burned down. And he found out about it very bluntly and somewhat brutally less than a week later.

He wasn't quite sure what his sons had argued about to keep quiet all the way from school and then immediately lock in their rooms, but he suspected Dream had something to do with it. Not that he had any evidence for it, it was just his first thought, and he thought he might as well stick to it. Especially since neither of the boys wanted to let him know the whole thing. Techno didn't let him into the room at all. Wilbur dug himself into the sheets, pulled the pillow over his head, and made only soft grunts, so Phil finally left both of them alone, resolving to give them some time.

A few hours later, at dinner, he was a little less forgiving and a lot more tired.

"Can't you just make up?" He asked when the atmosphere at the table was getting hard to bear.

Wilbur stuffed a pancake on a fork, scrubbing it all over the plate. He exceptionally took a seat next to Phil, leaving Techno alone on the other side of the table.

"I could," he grunted, sliding a little lower in his chair, probably trying to kick his brother under the table. "If Techno weren't such a moron."

Phil sighed heavily and was about to roll his eyes as a prelude to a long, instructive monologue that it wasn't worth holding a grudge for a long time, which would have no effect,

but at least he could have said he had tried. His gaze fell on Techno's face, however, and something about his expression made him change his mind.

"Wilbur, don't call him that," he scolded his son, who immediately turned to him genuinely indignant.

"Why?"

"Because it's not nice."

Wilbur grimaced as he crossed his arms.

"It never bothered you," he grunted, which was hard to argue with.

Phil has never been particularly restrictive about the vocabulary his children use. He reminded them regularly that some situations required more caution than others, with particular regard to school, and he absolutely didn't allow anyone to be mocked, but he would almost give them a free hand when playing with their friends. And he was just beginning to regret it a bit.

"I don't mind when you do it with your friends, because you all think it is just a joke," he explained. Or at least he tried, because Wilbur was clearly not going to just acknowledge it and end the subject.

"And? Techno knows I'm kidding too," he snorted, turning to the other boy for confirmation. "You know, don't you?"

Techno grimaced as he put the cutlery down and pushed the plate away from him so he could place his forearms on the table and hide his face in them. He hadn't finished his serving, and that alone would have set off an alarm in Phil's head. Combined with such a helpless gesture, it gave the effect of an alarm siren.

"I don't care," he grunted, sounding absolutely unconvincing.

"See?" Wilbur pointed at him. "He doesn't care!"

For the first time in a long, long time, Phil wanted to just tell his son to keep quiet.

"But I do," he snapped, a little sharper than he intended, and the boy immediately stopped looking so sure of himself.

"Well, I don't think that he's stupid or something, obviously," he said, this time probably more to justify himself. He curled up under Phil's gaze, and turned back to his brother, this time for support. "You know I don't, right?"

Techno just pressed his face tighter into the sleeves of his sweatshirt.

"I don't care what you think."

The material partially muffled his voice, but Phil could still feel how uncertain and trembling his voice was, and when he additionally sniffed... Oh.

Oh no.

Phil had absolutely no idea what to do. Except slapping himself in the face because how many times did he have to make a mistake before he finally learned to avoid it? How many times had he had to promise himself that he would watch his children more closely, that he would listen to them, and that he would finally start to notice these tiny, inconspicuous signs and learn from them? How many more times had Techno had to get angry when something went wrong the first time, be offended when Wilbur teased his cards after losing, and stressed that he was 'not stupid', although no one even suggested it, before Phil was finally going to understand that he's damn oversensitive about this?

Wilbur must have realized that he had made a big mistake as his expression softened and he jumped up from chair.

"Oh. I'm sorry." He circled the table and, pausing beside his brother, rested his cheek on the table, trying to meet his eyes. "I was really just kidding."

Techno reacted so quickly that Phil didn't even register it. He blinked, and when he opened his eyes, Wilbur was already sitting on the ground, next to an overturned chair, and Techno was running up the stairs.

"Leave me alone!" He shouted before the door to his room banged open.

Predictably, Wilbur hadn't thought to obey. He was back on his feet in a second, racing upstairs.

"Techno! I didn't mean that!"

Phil wasn't sure if he should follow him or not. On the one hand, a ten-year-old might not be the most suitable person for comforting another equally traumatized child after all. On the other hand, he really didn't want Techno to feel trapped, or to get the impression that even in his own home, he could never have a moment to calmly deal with his own emotions before someone asked him to explain himself. Phil wanted to give him space, but at the same time signal that he could come to them for help at any moment, but he had no idea how to reach that compromise. Especially with Wilbur, who still took a hard time when someone was angry with him and panicked if he wasn't immediately reassured that everything was fine, no one hated him, and no one would stop liking him just because he did something stupid.

Wilbur needed immediate comfort. Techno needed time for himself.

Phil needed a long vacation.

So, naturally, he got the complete opposite.

The first thing he heard was a thud. Then there was a short, broken scream, but it was enough to make a shiver run down his spine. He jumped up from his chair, climbed the stairs in three

enormous leaps and, not even thinking about knocking, let alone waiting for permission, threw open the door to Techno's room.

There was a book on the floor. Not too thick, a bit shabby, with a blue and white cover.

Phil had no idea why he remembered it. He had no idea why he even noticed it. Perhaps it was an automatic defensive reaction - to focus on something small, something stable, something normal, so as not to get overwhelmed by the chaos he jumped into without thinking.

Wilbur sat on the floor, knees drawn up against which he rested his forehead, covering his ears with trembling hands. He gasped in short, shallow breaths, pausing over and over for a moment, probably trying to calm himself down, but each time he ended up deteriorating.

He certainly didn't care about any book.

Techno stood a few steps away from him, pale and no less terrified. He opened his mouth when he saw Phil, but made no sound as he stepped back and pressed his back against the wall.

"I didn't mean to...!" he gasped finally, somewhere on the verge of screaming and screeching. "I told him to get out, but he just...! And he didn't want to go away!" He paused for a moment to catch his breath, but it took far more time and effort than it should have been. "I just wanted... I just wanted him to go away. And I was so terribly angry and... and I threw a book at him and he suddenly..."

He curled his shoulders, slipping slowly downward as if his legs were failing to obey him. Or maybe just to be able to immediately curl up and protect against the blow. The way he looked at Phil made it clear that this was what he expected.

The book was still on the floor. And beside her, two children, one of whom were staring at him, now crying openly.

"I didn't mean to, Phil, I really-" His lips twitched and he didn't even try to wipe away the tears. "Please..."

His cheeks were wet, and a few strands of hair came out of the braid and fell randomly across his face.

And that's what finally brought Phil back to reality. The pink braid Wilbur had braided this morning, which made them almost late for school. He looked into Techno's eyes once more, wide open, full of tears and overwhelming terror, before turning away, crouching next to his younger child.

"Hey, kiddo."

He leaned down to catch his gaze and immediately felt the boy's hand tighten on his forearm. He needed nothing more to hold him close and hug him tightly, stroking his back and

repeating "Come on, it's fine now..." until the child's desperate breath turned into crying and trembling hands gripped his neck tightly.

"Nothing's happening," he assured, slipping his fingers into the dark hair, rocking the boy at a steady, calming pace. "You're okay, you know?"

Though no one really expected an answer from him, Wilbur nodded.

"I know." His voice was faint, and he was still shivering like the worst frost, but though his whole body was clearly in protest, he loosened his grip. "It's already... It's okay now."

It wasn't okay. It was definitely a long way from "okay" and Phil didn't understand why he was even trying to lie. But then he glanced at Techno to make sure he was still here, maybe not safe and sound, but at least safe, and Wilbur immediately clung to his hand so tightly it was almost painful.

"It's not his fault!" He squealed, resting his forehead on his shoulder. "He didn't want to!"

Phil swallowed, glancing down at his son, still panicked, shaky and, apparently, even in this state trying to defend his brother. From him.

No matter how many times he read, heard, and even told himself that he couldn't take it personally, that some reflexes would just stay with his boys forever, ingrained too deeply to be dismissed entirely. Each time he still felt that he had failed. That he had made some bloody big mistake, hadn't done enough, didn't try as he should.

He carefully stroked his son's head to give him a few more seconds to pull himself together.

"I know he didn't want to," he said, hoping the other boy could hear him too.

Wilbur, at least, heard for sure, for he let go of his hand as he pulled away, giving him a very clear sign to act. You know what to do, he seemed to be saying. He knew.

Techno wasn't trying to run away or hide when Phil approached him. He watched his movement vigilantly, cringing as if he wanted to become small enough to disappear altogether. If Phil ever thought that nothing would ever hurt him more than seeing Wilbur crying in the bathroom, absolutely convinced that someone was about to hurt him, he was wrong.

He looked around helplessly, as if that way he could find inspiration and the right words, but instead his gaze fell on the white teddy bear lying on the bed. He reached for him, but Techno immediately jerked his head up, stretching his arms out towards him.

"No, please, don't take him away!"

Phil froze for a second before, still clutching the stuffed animal's paw, slowly step back and crouch down in front of the boy.

"I'm not going to take him. I just..." He handed him the mascot a little awkwardly, watching it instantly disappear in the boy's embrace. "I thought it would be easier for you with him."



In some way it definitely was. Though not for Phil, because he still had a crying, bloody wounded child in front of him, who expected the worst of him, and whom he wanted and couldn't help. But Techno certainly did a little better when he could cuddle his face in the mascot and at least cut himself off from the world that way.

Phil wasn't at all sure if he should try to force him back. But he was damned sure he wouldn't forgive himself if he let the child believe for a moment longer that a teddy bear was the only thing he could rely on and in which he had a right to seek comfort.

"Kiddo, it's okay. Nobody's mad at you, it was just an accident. Can you look at me?"

Techno shook his head. More strands emerged from the braid and fell onto the white furr. Phil was eager to brush them away, as he would most likely do with Wilbur in a similar situation. He wanted to hug the boy, stroke his head and assure him that everything was fine and...

And he had no idea why he wasn't doing it.

When your child talks, shut up, listen, and learn. And no one has ever screamed louder than Techno at this point. He might not have uttered a word, but his whole posture, his arms clutching Steve, his gaze and a desperate "please" and how he sometimes looked at Phil and Wilbur and seemed almost jealous...

Phil placed a hand carefully on his shoulder. The boy immediately flinched and tense, but didn't try to pull away.

"I promise I won't hurt you," he assured him, and when there was no reaction, he sighed softly. "Hey. I never lie, remember? You said it yourself."

Techno let out a muffled, choppy sob, gasped a few times, and finally, with obvious reluctance and still hesitating, raised his head.

It took exactly one look into the large, wet eyes for Phil to know that he was right.

He moved closer and, kneeling on one knee, wrapped his arms around the boy. He didn't think he'd ever tried to be so gentle in his life, as if he were holding something very precious and fragile. No. Not "as if". He slid his fingers into boy's hair, his other hand pulling him closer, immediately feeling the kid's body tense, then relaxed, and finally Techno smacked his face against his shirt. The stuffed animal slipped from his hands, but he didn't seem to notice it, hugging Phil tightly by the neck as if his life depended on it.

For some reason, Phil was afraid of this moment. He was afraid that he would never feel the same as when Wilbur first dared to cry in his arms. That relief and emotion and the overwhelming conviction that he would never, absolutely never let his child be harmed in any way. That he would never let him feel rejected, abandoned and on his own. That it would never let him forget, even for a second, how special, important and necessary he is.

He was afraid that he would never learn to love Techno. Because no matter how cruel it sounded and how much he tried to disavow the thought, loving him was a challenge he wasn't prepared for. But maybe he didn't have to be. Maybe they both could just learn it on the fly.

Maybe they didn't need any big moment and any sudden rush of feelings, and maybe neither of these things was ever going to come. Perhaps in their case these small, inconspicuous signs counted.

The way Techno's trembling hands tightened on his shirt as he repeated 'I'm sorry' over and over again. The despair and desperation with which he clung to him, as if he feared that he would never be able to do it again, and had to enjoy it in advance.

And how when his breathing finally straightened, the first thing he said was:

"I don't want to go back there. Phil, please, I don't want to go back."

Sometimes there are promises that you just don't want to make. The ones that sound nice and soothing, but the more you think about them, the more clearly you can't keep them. Because life can be unpredictable and a guarantee is at best mere hope and at worst a mere lie. Phil knew it all too well. He made such promises far too often.

It wasn't one of them.

"I'll never let that happen," he replied, and he was sure of it more than anything else in his life. "I will never, ever let them hurt you again."

Techno didn't answer. He just hugged him tighter and Phil let him cry.

"I'll take you downstairs, okay?" He asked when the boy finally calmed down a bit. "We'll all be a little more comfortable there."

He waited a moment for a short nod before taking the kid under his knees, lifting himself off the floor, trying not to think about the fact that he was probably seriously straining his spine. Wilbur, also much calmer, though still crying and a little shaky, immediately followed in his footsteps and clung to his sleeve, letting him lead him down the hall and down the stairs. As soon as Phil sank heavily on the couch, one child on his lap, his face hidden in his shirt, the other immediately slipped under his arm. As a result, they created a very strange combination of despair, desperation and comfort together.

"We're not insult anybody, okay? Phil ran his fingers through the dark mop of hair, his other hand stroking Techno's back. "Even as a joke. And no one in this house is stupid. We don't yell at each other and definitely don't throw things."

Techno sniffed loudly, slowly lifting his head to look at Wilbur.

"Sorry," he whimpered, and anyone with a bit of empathy could be angry with him at this point. And Wilbur had definitely more than a bit.

"It's fine," he said, leaning forward so that he could put his arm around him as well. "I know you didn't mean to."

While it was nice and definitely honest, Techno's beard trembled again.

"But I did," he said softly, with obvious difficulty and shame. "In that moment. Right after I didn't, but..."

Phil hummed in understanding, pulling him a little closer so he could rest his chin on the top of his head.

"Hey, Techno. It's okay. We'll work on it."

"It always ends like this," the boy didn't sound a little more convinced then before. In fact, he sounded like he was about to cry again. Which wasn't a bad thing, but Phil was absolutely convinced that his heart might not be able to withstand such a blow once again. "I'm angry and I hurt someone and they send me back."

"First of all, no one is sending anyone anywhere. Over my dead body. Second... It's not your fault, Techno. It's not your fault that no one has ever taught you how to deal with your emotions."

"I cry when I get angry," said Wilbur. "That's stupid too."

Phil closed his eyes for a second.

"It's not stupid at all, Wilbur, but thank you for wanting to help."

Techno just scowled at him.

"It's my fault I can't be normal," he muttered. It took a lot of will for Phil not to show how much it hurt him. How much it hurt every time any of his boys talked about himself like that.

"You're perfectly normal," he assured firmly, in a tone that leaves no room for protest. Because that one point was never negotiable. "You are a perfectly normal person with completely normal emotions, which you don't fully understand yet. Nothing you can't work on. We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay?" He leaned in to kiss first one, then the other, on the hair. Techno held his breath for a second before looking up at him with wide open eyes full of wonder. So Phil kissed him again, this time on the forehead. "I'm not angry at you. It's just that we're all a bit too tired today. Okay?" Two mutterings in agreement and an absolutely unwillingness to break the collective hug. "Okay. So no insults and no flying books. We don't move other people's things without asking. We knock before we enter the room. Anyone want to add something else?"

"No cigarettes," Techno muttered, quietly and a bit shyly, perhaps not entirely sure if he could actually speak.

Phil smiled to encourage him.

"No cigarettes."

"And incense," added Wilbur.

"Exactly."

Techno rested his cheek on his shoulder while peering down at him as if trying to read something in his face.

"I don't like it when you close the patio door," he confessed hesitantly. "I'm afraid you won't let me in."

Phil blinked.

"Oh. Okay. It will never, ever happen. But I will remember."

As it quickly turned out, he had to remember many things. He had known about some of them for a long time, especially in the case of Wilbur, some he had guessed (such as the concerted dislike of both boys towards everything related to alcohol), but a few were a complete surprise.

"I don't like that I can't close the door," Techno confessed quickly and on the exhale. "I know you don't come in without asking, but... But still."

Phil ran his fingers through his hair, trying to calm him down a little. The braid fell apart completely, so he started braiding it all over again.

"Is that why you blocked the door with a chest of drawers?"

"It's just... I don't like that someone might come in and I won't notice."

Phil nodded that he understood.

"Okay. We can do this: I will add a lock to your door, but only if I have a spare key. I promise to only use it in very important situations, like when you've been sick. What do you think?" He smiled as the boy relaxed a bit. "You can always ask if something like that bothers you, you know?"

This time the boy was silent for much longer. He reached back to the freshly braided braid, running his fingers slowly over it.

"Once when I asked for it, they got so furious," he finally said. "They said I was probably hiding something from them, and they searched my room. And—" He pursed his lips and suddenly slipped off Phil's lap. He sat down next to him, much closer than usual, but Phil still felt as if something very important had been taken away from him. "I'm not a thief, I just... like having food in my room. Just in case. And I tried to tell them this, but they only screamed over and over how awful and ungrateful I am and then they took the door."

Phil had never felt so torn in his life. On the one hand, his son needed him, he needed his support and comfort. On the other - getting the address, commuting by car and slamming a few people shouldn't take more than a few hours, he could somehow stuff it into the calendar between healing one trauma and discovering another...

"They took the door? To your room?" he made sure, trying to somehow stop the rising tide of anger. "Just like that?"

The boy shrugged.

"It was their home."

"This is stupid," Wilbur interjected, before Phil could curse in his mind enough times to make sure nothing escapes his mouth as soon as he opens then. "This is Phil's house, but I have a door. And I have my room."

Well, at least one child understood that there was something seriously wrong with this type of reasoning. After all, half the battle.

"Because you have a right to privacy. You both have. It's not normal for someone to deliberately deprive you of this."

Techno shrugged, not seeming any closer to understanding. He was hurt, resentful and treated unfairly, but clearly couldn't clearly define what had happened to him as bad.

"They said they're my parents, so they decide what I can and cannot."

"Parents, not *owners*."

"What's the difference?"

"Big. You're a child, Techno." He glanced at Wilbur, drawing him tighter to his side. "You both are. And sometimes you have stupid ideas and my job is to make sure you don't kill each other, so yes, I'll forbid some things from you. But there are limits that no one has the right to cross. I can forbid you to go outside if I think it's too late or if you need to do your homework first. But I cannot lock you in a room for a few hours or forbid you to have friends. Just as I can decide what times we'll eat meals, but I cannot forbid you to eat at all". He looked significantly at his younger child. "You understand?"

Wilbur nodded, but Techno hesitated.

"So you won't take them?" He asked, frowning.

"Take what?"

"The door."

So much for his lecture. He will definitely have to bring it up at the earliest opportunity when everyone won't be so tired and still full of emotions.

"No. I won't. And I'll put a lock on them."

The boy seemed completely satisfied with this. Phil - a bit less. But he really didn't have the strength to completely change Techno's worldview at this point. Neither of them had, judging from the fact that less than twenty minutes later Wilbur was already asleep, crouched by his side, head in his lap, and Techno rocked from side to side, barely keeping his eyes open. Phil wanted to pull him closer, back to the safe cocoon they had formed before, but the more the emotions subsided, the less confident he felt. The boy had just seemed so hungry for his

attention and any kind of tenderness, but now that his cheeks had dried up and his sniffles had stopped, he was starting to distance himself again. Phil didn't quite know how to understand this.

"You can sit closer," he finally offered. Techno straightened up immediately, shifting his watchful gaze to him. "If you want, of course. I won't force you. But I'd like you to know that I keep my distance just so you don't get uncomfortable. If you ever feel like... a hug or a chat or just hang out together, I'll be very happy."

He *expected* the boy to decline the offer and, as a show of strength and independence, move even further.

He *hoped* that he would actually take his words seriously and allow himself to be helped.

What he didn't consider at all was that Techno would reach his braid again and, looking closely at the weave, he would softly reply:

"I thought you didn't like me."

Phil wasn't sure how long he just stared at the kid in silence. It took a few seconds for him to wake up from shock enough to at least try to say something meaningful.

"Why-? Of course I like you. How could I not like you?"

The boy shrugged, drawing his knees a little higher to his chin. His fingers continued to travel up and down the braid.

"I'm annoying," he muttered, which was... a tad too close to the truth to be clearly denied.

After all, Techno was annoying at times. Mainly when want to be. The thing is, he'd wanted it a lot less lately, and he's been trying to work on himself, so it would be unnecessary cruelty to point it out to him.

"You're a child. All children sometimes do or say things that make adults have a headache. You're not as unique in this as you think you are."

The boy finally left his hair alone, wrapping his arms around himself tightly instead.

"And I can still stay?"

Phil wasn't surprised by the question. Sad and concerned, but not surprised.

"Of course. I told you I couldn't send you back, remember?"

"But that was before. Before..." He hesitated, then rested his forehead on his knees. It was hard to tell if he was more ashamed or afraid, but he was certainly trying hard to hide it. "I hurt Wilbur."

"It was an accident. You didn't do it on purpose." Phil reached out, trying to touch the boy's shoulder, but he flinched and pulled away. Not far away, but just enough to send the right

signal.

In a way, it was progress. He made no attempt to run away, and he seemed to have realized at last that Phil wouldn't do anything against his will. But it was still fucking harsh to see him like this.

"Yes, but... But you *like* Wilbur. And he was crying because of me."

Phil was fully aware from the start that he would make a whole lot of mistakes. He tried to avoid them as much as he could, but never deluded himself that he would be the perfect father.

But this... that he will never forgive himself.

"Oh. Oh, Techno..." He tried to find words good enough to justify himself somehow, but the fact that he didn't feel like he deserved an excuse bothered him. He had known for a long time that he favored Wilbur, but had never tried to do anything about it. He had never even considered that his children could see it too, and they might draw the wrong conclusions from it. And it definitely should. "Listen. I can understand why you might have thought I cared more for him than for you. And I'm sorry. I missed it in time. You had every right to feel less important. But I want you to know that it is not so. I'm... a little overprotective of him. And I spoil him a little."

Techno snorted loudly.

"*A lot.*"

"A lot," he admitted, sighing heavily. "But that's because from the very beginning he let me know that he needed it. It doesn't justify me in any way, but I was sure you didn't want it."

The boy finally looked up, though he still held it low.

"I didn't want to. I don't need this... all of it. But still..." He began to play with his fingers to find something to do with his hands. "I don't know. I felt bad. Sometimes. That you're not trying."

Phil watched him torment his own fingers for a moment before leaning forward, taking his hands in his.

"I didn't want to scare you."

Techno stared at their joined hands before carefully squeezing Phil's fingers slightly firm.

"I'm not scared," he said, and then added, "Not anymore."

As if to confirm this, he moved closer to his side. Then he turned around, wrapped his arms around Phil, and snuggled against him as tightly as he could. And in this there was no longer any message other than a simple human need.

"It's so weird," he muttered as Phil immediately hugged him as much as he could without waking Wilbur. "Can I do that more often?"

Phil smiled, though for the moment no one could see it.

"Whenever you want."

"As often as Wilbur?"

"Even more often," he said, kissing the pink hair before resting his cheek on it. "I'm Sorry for making you felt less important."

Techno just shrugged.

"It's okay now."

And it probably was, because an hour later Phil was still trapped between the two sleeping boys, cuddled up against him as if he were in the only safe haven. Theoretically, he should wake them up and make them go to bed, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to do it, even as his legs were slowly getting numb. Maybe in a few minutes, or in another hour when he is too tired himself. But not now. He had to enjoy it first.

## Chapter End Notes

It's fluff time! (Take it before I change my mind)

Thank everyone in comments for your help! <3



## Chapter 34

Techno turned out to be clingy, even more than Wilbur, which was quite an achievement. Phil wasn't in any way surprised by this. He suspected everyone would crave closeness after years of avoiding physical contact. What somewhat baffled him was the openness with which Techno began to ask for attention, at the same time being absolutely ignorant of how to name the newfound need and what words to use to make the magic happen.

"I don't see the pictures," he muttered, sliding into Phil's arms as he tried to read him to sleep. He was far too distracted and awake for a late hour and couldn't stay under the covers for more than five minutes.

Phil raised an eyebrow.

"There are no pictures here," he remarked, trying his best not to laugh as the boy scrambled onto his lap and rested comfortably against his chest.

Techno was silent for a moment, then without warning he placed his hands on Phil's, slamming the book shut in one motion.

"Then find one with them."

Phil didn't find it. Mainly because he wasn't trying to search at all. He just pulled the boy closer to him and allowed him to slowly quiet down, rocking him gently.

"You can just ask," he said softly, running his fingers through his pink hair. "You don't need any reason, you know?"

Techno didn't answer, preoccupied with pretending to be asleep. But he obviously took the advice to heart, because when he entered the kitchen the next day, still sleepy and in his pajamas, he immediately reached out when he saw Phil.

"Now?" he asked, his voice still hoarse from sleep, staring at his caregiver with such hope that he immediately put the pan with the undercooked scrambled eggs aside and crouched down to fulfill the request. They ate cereal for breakfast, but no one complained.

Thus, completely unknowingly and without intention to do so, Phil started a hard time. Hard and heavy, in a very literal sense, because although he could hardly think of it, he was no longer young, and his children weighed quite a lot. But apparently if your heart is too soft to wake your son up, you have to endure yourself.

"You said I was too heavy," Wilbur muttered, clearly balancing somewhere between reality and sleep.

Phil just gasped, tossing him lightly in his arms so he wouldn't accidentally slip off the stairs.

"Nah, I'm just old and whining."

He glanced over his shoulder, meeting Techno's gaze. The boy was leaning over the back of the couch, resolutely awake and fully capable of overcoming the last twenty meters between him and the bed on his own. But he clearly didn't want to, and preferred to wait patiently for his turn. Not that Wilbur was even slightly better in that regard. Every time Techno started fawning on Phil ("I'm not fawning! I just wanted to pass and you were at the door!"), the other boy materialized out of nowhere, just as hungry for tenderness. Phil had no idea if it was a bit of jealousy or just taking advantage of the opportunity, but to tell the truth, it didn't bother him at all.

Even if it happened quite suddenly at times.

"Can I sit here with you?" Techno looked at him uncertainly, rocking on his heels. He was clearly making sure to not enter the office, as if it was a forbidden land, which Wilbur didn't bump into five times a day.

Phil looked away from the monitor, grinning broadly.

"Sure. But it's rather boring" he pointed out in advance, but in response he only heard 'I don't care.' "Then come here. You just gotta get a chair or a stool from... Oh." He broke off as Techno flashed under his arm without a second delay and, holding on to the desk for balance, sat comfortably on his lap. Phil grabbed him by the waist quite instinctively. "Okay. Yes, we can do that too."

Surprisingly, as it turned out, ten-year-olds are still able to stay in a place with absolutely nothing to do. Phil couldn't understand why no one had informed him sooner. It even crossed his mind that maybe Wilbur was just some kind of exception with an excess of energy, and he must have drawn him in with his thoughts, because less than fifteen minutes later his second child had pulled a chair from his room and took a seat next to him, resting his temple on his shoulder and muttering from time to time with dissatisfaction when Phil had to move his hand.

"Okay, enough," Phil said finally, when he began to feel guilty about having the nerve to try to work at all. He slipped his hand under Techno's lap, standing up and lifting him. The boy, roused from his nap, flinched and clung to his shoulder, but quickly relaxed at the familiar surroundings. "I can't work like that. To bedroom, now!"

Wilbur frowned, still not moving.

"Whos?"

"Mine. We'll take a nap, then you guys let me work, okay?"

He didn't have to repeat twice. Wilbur was the first to burst into the bedroom as he jumped onto the bed, and was also the first to fall asleep, cuddled against Phil's side, hugging his waist. Techno, occupying his other side, clung to his arm with all of his limbs and fell asleep not long after. Thus, Phil lost feeling in his hand for another hour.

He didn't regret anything.

\* \* \*

With the beginning of December, Phil was once again forced to enter the school. This time, however, none of his children hurt themselves or anyone else. Though Techno looked as if he had seriously expected Phil to hurt him when he returned.

"You have to go?" He asked a third time, watching Phil put on his shoe as if he were seriously considering stealing a second one from him. "Nothing will happen if you don't go. We can say that you're sick. Or that the car broke down. Or that you're dead..."

Phil, a bit amused so far, now looked at him with much more attention. He understood a bit of stress, but that?

"It's just an parents' meeting, kiddo. And it's not that I don't know your grades." Techno looked away. Phil paused with his hand halfway to the hanger. "I know your grades, right?" The boy just muttered something incomprehensible, rocking on his heels. "You get your grades at exactly the same time as Wilbur. And Wilbur always tells me about all the tests. Right?"

He turned his head towards the living room for confirmation, but his younger child only stared at him with a straight face before slowly returning to watching the cartoon.

Phil rubbed the bridge of his nose. There were times when he simply detested fraternal solidarity.

"If you don't know something, it can't hurt you," Techno muttered. And then, much more quietly, and probably mainly to himself, he added: "And me neither."

Phil immediately forgot about the long lecture on how concealing facts was, in fact, a form of lying. Well, maybe he didn't 'forget', but rather 'put it aside until his children will be absolutely sure that they are safe'.

"We talked about it, right?" He reminded, trying not to sound like a reprimand. Techno had every right to have doubts, and he had every right to expect a patient response and explanation. Even if it happened several times a day sometimes. "Nobody in this house will ever lay a hand on you."

"I would," said Wilbur. Phil gave him a scolding look that he probably hadn't even noticed.

"You better make sure I don't take away your headphones," he threatened, straightening to finally put on his jacket.

If Wilbur took the threat to heart, there was no sign of it. Techno, on the other hand, seemed even more flustered if possible. Phil ruffled his hair to cheer him up.

"I'll be back in an hour or so. And I want to find both the house and you in exactly the same condition in which I am leaving you. No fights, okay?"

He was answered with two muttering sounds that were something very far from 'Yes, of course' and much closer to 'You'll never know about it anyway.' Really, there was nothing worse in the world than siblings.

Maybe except the parent-teacher meetings. Not even because his kids had any serious problems, in fact, they were both doing much better than he feared. Phil just didn't like the education system as such, with its rigid framework, pressure, and the belief that if you don't master every fraction of every subject perfectly in elementary school, you'll never achieve anything in your life and you can say goodbye to the good future. And maybe a bit because he didn't like the way the teacher talked about Techno and his problems with concentration, looking at Phil as if he was standing over the child and nudging him with a pen every now and then.

Apart from that, and the fact that Wilbur was clearly a little too fond of showing off (an unimaginable crime), his boys did quite well. Their grades clearly revealed which classes were of real interest to them and which they only made for tiresome necessity, but that was precisely what he couldn't blame them for.

The only person who had no comments about his sons was Wilbur's music teacher.

"He's such a lovely child," she said with a broad smile, and Phil immediately liked her. She was quite young, maybe a few years younger than him, and seemed very nice. "A bit too lively, but you can't be angry with him. And he's really capable. If directed him properly, I'm sure he has a chance to be a great musician."

Phil blinked, a little confused. Not with a string of praise because, to be honest, he agreed with everything, but with a general message.

"Oh. Honestly, he never mentioned it." He tried to remember at least one time when his son mentioned that he would like to do anything related to music himself, but nothing came to mind. "He likes musicals, that's for sure. And you can't make him to take headphones off at dinner. But I didn't think it was something... serious."

"Definitely serious," she nodded. "At first he was very shy, but now he comes to me on every long break. Sometimes I let him stay a little longer than he should, but he's so committed, I don't have the heart to take the guitar from him. He even gave it a name!"

"Yes, he does that." Phil almost laughed because of course Wilbur had named the guitar. Like his bike and most of his toys.

He didn't quite understand why the boy had never talked to him about his hobby. Why didn't he just ask if Phil could sign him up for extra-curricular activities or even buy a guitar if he enjoyed playing so much. But on the other hand, despite the fact that he was going to remain little in Phil's head forever, Wilbur was clearly starting to grow up and keeping more and more things to himself. Phil might have enjoyed the privilege of being the only important and trusted person in his life for a while, but that had started to change once he had made friends.

Especially recently since he had a brother too. So he decided not to push. Even if in a tiny, tiny percentage he felt a little hurt.

As agreed, he found the house in one piece. It's damn surprising if he was meant to be honest.

"Already there?" Wilbur leaned over the edge of the couch, smiling at Phil as innocently as if he'd never done anything wrong. Or as if he'd never been caught raiding.

On the other side of the couch, the pink hair disappeared behind the backrest.

"How was it?" Techno sounded much less happy. "What did they tell you?"

Phil took off his jacket slowly and started taking off his shoes just as slowly. Techno jerked nervously until he finally couldn't stand it and turned around, also sticking his head over the backrest. Unlike Wilbur, he seemed really flustered, and Phil felt bad for intentionally trying to tease him.

"That a week ago Schlatt clogged the school toilets and there was a small flood."

Wilbur didn't even try to pretend to be surprised.

"Oh, really?" He asked, drawing out the syllables. "And he didn't tell me at all..."

In response, he received a scolding look that he made nothing of.

"Wilbur, we all know you were there too. The two of you always do stupid things together."

The boy rested his elbows on the back of the couch, resting his chin on his clasped hands.

"But they had proof?"

Sometimes Phil was absolutely sure that if he hadn't loved this boy so much, he would have wanted to murder him most of the time.

"No, and that's the only reason you get away with it." He set his shoes on the shelf, walked across the living room, and leaned over the backrest so he could grab one child with one arm and the other with the other. "And I saw your grades. You're both doing really great."

Wilbur, accustomed to such gestures, immediately rested his cheek on his shoulder, but Techno flinched, still anxious. It wasn't until a few seconds, when he realized that nothing was wrong, that his fingers gripped Phil's shirt uncertainly.

"I'm not doing 'great' at all," he muttered, and sounded unsettlingly certain that someone would actually agree to it at any moment.

Phil leaned back a little so he could look at him.

"Yes, you do. I've seen your grades from last years. You're doing a lot better now, especially lately." He smiled. "I can see that you started to trying hard."

Techno opened his mouth, then closed it as if he had changed his mind at the last moment.

"A little," he muttered finally, looking away. Phil just pulled him closer, stroking his hair.

"Exactly. I'm proud of both of you and I propose a movie marathon to celebrate."

Wilbur perked up instantly.

"I'll make popcorn!" He announced, slipping out of his embrace and running to the kitchen as if afraid someone might try to stop him.

It wasn't a completely unfounded fear, as Phil and Techno exchanged glances immediately.

"He will burn it," the boy complained, lowering his voice to a whisper.

Phil nodded.

"On purpose," he added, just as softly. "I'll give us another one when he doesn't look. Let him have it."

\* \* \*

Both report cards were hanged on the refrigerator, right next to a picture of Lin-Manuel Miranda (which Wilbur hadn't allowed to take off for weeks because of the reasons). Phil studied them for a long moment, proud of his sons, but also of himself. Somehow, even though it could be hard and at times he was beginning to lose hope, he managed to make it. He managed to create a family, maybe a little small, maybe still a bit unstable, but sincere in their feelings and the need to stick together. And even if he couldn't know if it would actually be easier from now on, and frankly he was almost convinced that it wouldn't be, these small moments were enough to make up for all the sleepless nights and damaged nerves.

Techno, still stomping step by step behind him, didn't seem to share his pride at all.

"Why did you hang it here?" He asked, wrinkling his nose. Regardless of how many times Phil said that he was not only not angry with him, but actually considered his grades very promising, the boy was still very sensitive on this point. Phil couldn't tell if he was more afraid of being punished or that he would be called stupid, but he promised himself to allay both fears.

"To always remember I have two smart boys at home," he explained, ruffling his hair, but withdrew his hand as the boy grimaced and slipped out from under his hand. "You don't want me to do that? I can take them off if you want."

Techno didn't want that. He didn't have to admit it out loud, his expression betrayed him, a glint of fear in his eyes. But he was still staring at the floor, his hands tightly clasped on the sleeves of his sweatshirt.

"Mine looks stupid next to Wilbur's," he muttered finally, which, okay, objectively, was kind of true, but in Phil's eyes he missed the point by miles. He didn't have time to say it aloud, however, because the boy suddenly straightened, lifting his chin high and looking at him with a sudden rush of determination. "But I'll try harder."

Phil really appreciated his commitment and motivation. But he seriously feared that its source might be a little less healthy than it first appeared. For although Techno calmed down as soon as he discovered that he too could get as much attention as he wanted, there were still times when he glanced at his brother with very badly concealed jealousy. And although he was angry more with himself than with Wilbur, it was still a very bad habit.

Phil smiled as he crouched down in front of the boy.

"I'm glad to hear that," he assured at the beginning. "But you don't have to try to be like Wilbur. You are good at many things too."

Techno scowled at him.

"Like what?"

"You're good at English. And you can take care of the garden instead of burning it. And your toasts are actually eatable." Seeing that it is slowly starting to take effect, he tapped the boy lightly on the nose with his finger to relax the atmosphere completely. "And you're funny. And very nice if you only want to be."

The corners of Techno's mouth rose slightly. He still didn't seem entirely convinced, but no one really expected one conversation to raise his self-esteem once and for all. The most important thing was that they took the first step in this direction. The rest would come over time.

"I can try to want to," he muttered, tugging his sweatshirt sleeves tighter. His cheeks reddened, and before Phil could react, several dozen extra pounds were already on his right side.

He laughed as he stroked the boy's back.

"You're so clingy lately," he said, kissing his temple so the kid would know he was just teasing him and not mind.

"Because it's not fair. Other children always could cuddle. And I just now. I have to catch up."

When deciding to take in the children, Phil knew perfectly well that he must have iron nerves and angelic patience. He didn't foresee, however, that he would also need a heart that would be immune to constant emotional upheaval of all kinds.

He gently pulled the boy away from him, just enough to be able to cup his face in his hands and meet his eyes before he leaned down, bringing their foreheads together.

"I'm glad to help with this," he said softly, closing his eyes for a moment before removing his hands from the boy's cheeks.

Techno stared at him with wide eyes.

"You did it," he whispered, raising his hand to touch his forehead as if he expected to find some trace on it. "That... that thing. With forehead. I thought... I thought only you two could do that."

Phil immediately wanted to hug him again and never let go this time.

"Oh.,Techno..." he began, but at the same moment, somewhere behind him came a loud:

"I want to do it, too!"

He almost jumped when Wilbur suddenly appeared beside him. As he said - shocks of all kinds. He kept that comment to himself, mostly because no one would hear it anyway. Wilbur was too busy grabbing his brother by the ears to pull his head close to his, and Techno didn't seem to have even loose contact with their reality at this point. He only woke up when Wilbur looked deep into his eyes and whispered in a low tone:

"I can see into your soul."

Techno immediately stepped back, throwing his hands away.

"Piss off," he snorted, although it was evident that he was a bit amused himself. "Why are you always so weird?"

Wilbur sucked in a breath.

"I'm cute!" He feigned indignation, then grinned. "I'll teach you how to make people listen to you."

Phil stopped smiling.

"Wilbur, it's called manipulation, and you're definitely abusing it. Especially on me."

He straightened up and opened the refrigerator, finally taking care of what he had come to the kitchen for. He pretended not to hear the whispers at all, exchanging behind his back.

"He's weak."

"You don't even know how much!"

He sighed inwardly. Sometimes he wondered how people were coping with having three or more children at home. He himself would probably give up after a week and sell them all to the zoo, where they belong. Not that it was much easier with two - but at least he had enough hands to grab both of them at once and silence them for a few seconds. And that's something.



\* \* \*

Techno wasn't particularly happy to visit the hairdresser. In fact, Phil was seriously concerned that the boy would change his mind at the last minute and wouldn't even get out of the car, but somehow, after long persuasion, the child ended up in the chair in front of the mirror.

"But only a little," he said, glaring at the hairdresser. "Phil will be watching you."

Phil smiled, more than pleased with the role of guardian that had been entrusted to him.

"He doesn't like it when someone touch his hair," he explained, but the woman just nodded, completely indifferent. Apparently she was used to such situations.

Techno squeezed his hand tightly as soon as the scissors appeared in his sight, and didn't release it until he could see his new hairstyle from all angles. It wasn't until he was absolutely sure that his hair had survived the hairdressing experiment that he relaxed a bit and allowed Phil to regain the feel of his fingers. Getting rid of neon pink turned out to be a much more difficult challenge. Whatever ended up in the boy's shampoo was horribly durable and a complete color salvation would probably ruin the hair completely, so eventually Techno left the salon with a much brighter, more pastel color, this time applied evenly and professionally. He hadn't commented on the change in any way, except for a shrug when asked if he liked it, but the way he repeatedly ran his fingers through his hair and stared at himself in every shop window, the answer was guessable.

Phil wanted all problems to be solved just as easily. So that unpleasant memories can be removed and immediately replaced with new, much nicer ones. Unfortunately, neither the world nor the human psyche worked that way, so he wasn't at all surprised when the next night he was awakened by the creaking of the door. He opened his eyes, but before he could wake up enough to raise his head, Techno had already slipped under the covers and raised his arm just enough to slip under it.

"I had a bad dream," he explained quietly.

Phil hugged him a little tighter, resting a chin on the top of his head.

"You want to tell me about it?" He asked, because although it was probably the middle of the night, he had planned to get up early in the morning and every minute of sleep was worth its weight in gold, his children still was priority.

Techno didn't answer for a long moment. His breathing slowed, his shoulders relaxed, and his thoughts seemed far away.

"Are you gonna send me back?"

Phil opened his eyes but didn't move, letting the boy hide his face in his shoulder.

"Why would I do this?"

Techno shrugged.

"I'm not saying now. But... But later," he clarified, which didn't really explain anything at all, but Phil understood anyway. "When I actually do something bad, or when I'll be older, or... I don't know. In general."

Phil wasn't surprised by the question. Just like Techno shouldn't be surprised by the answer.

"No. Never."

The boy hummed, clearly dissatisfied.

"I'm giving you one last chance, you know?" He was clearly trying to pretend indifferent, but there was desperation in his voice. "If you tell me now, I won't be angry."

Phil was very anxious to tell him he should. He should be angry if someone had failed him in such a painful way, and he should know that he deserved to be treated a million times better. But it wasn't the time for such a conversation and that wasn't the answer the boy needed.

"Never," he said instead, stepping back a little so he could put his hands on the boy's cheeks and get him to lift his head. His eyes gleamed in the pale light streaming through the window, trusting and hopeful. "We're family, you're condemned to us."

He wasn't sure what reaction to expect. And Techno also probably had no idea if or how to react, because for a moment he just stared at Phil and then cuddled up to him again, slowly and carefully, as if he still didn't believe it was all happening.

"Phil?" When he spoke again, his voice was much softer than ever before. "Will you read something to me?"

Phil smiled, though he knew no one would see it.

"Okay. But you have to let me go for a while."

The arms around me just tightened a little.

"No."

"I can't reach for the book."

"Too bad." Techno glared at him from below. "That's your problem."

Phil exhaled slowly. Not that he had never make a fairy tales before, after all, he had one child at home hungry for bedtime stories, but he never felt particularly good at it. But that didn't mean he wasn't going to try.

"Okay... What do you want to hear about?"

"Something with dragons."

"Dragons, hm? Well, it could also use a kingdom."

The boy hummed approvingly.

"What's its name?"

Phil looked around helplessly. It would be much easier if his brain began to cooperate graciously. Or if he could just take a look at the map and choose the first weird-sounding name that he could see. But the map still hung above the desk in Wilbur's room, right where it had been hung the year before, perfectly filling the void. Though he still thought it would be better to cut off one of the poles.

He smiled at memory.

"Antarctic Empire."

Techno looked up, clearly curious.

"That sounds cold."

"Yhm. Cold and dangerous."

It wasn't the best story he'd ever come up with. In terms of creativity, it hadn't even come close to Wilbur's excuse why he still hadn't done his homework. But any of them expected anything special, and it wasn't all about the fairy tale as such. So Phil went on to talk about a brave knight that no one could defeat and who got himself into trouble all too often. But every time the danger got too great, he could count on taking refuge in his friend's castle.

Techno clearly had a very strong opinion on this.

"Why did he keep going back there?" He yawned, resting his cheek on Phil's shoulder. "If he was that strong, he could do on his own."

Phil ran his fingers through his hair, now surprisingly soft and smooth.

"Sometimes you just want to get back to someone. Because you miss them and want to see them again."

Techno made a low grunt.

"I don't want to go back to anyone," he said with a strange mix of anger and disappointment. "And I miss no one."

If Phil could take every thought of that kind and free his children from them once and for all, he wouldn't have hesitated for a second. Unfortunately, since the world was not only cruel but also bloody unfair, he only had words at his disposal.

"You know, not so long ago I thought that about myself, too," he said, slowly stroking the baby's back. "But then Wilbur showed up and suddenly I had someone very important to me and I realized that I was so damn lonely before. Even if I didn't realize it at all. And then you

came along. And suddenly it turned out that we still missed someone." He leaned in so he could kiss the boy on the temple, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Someone very, very important, without whom we couldn't be a full family."

He didn't have to see the boy's face. It was enough for him that his hands began to tremble, his breathing quickened, and after a while the silence was broken by a soft snuffle.

"You can go on telling," the boy muttered, pressing his face tighter against his shirt.

Phil talked, soothingly stroking his back until he was sure Techno was finally asleep. But as soon as he withdrew his hand, the child immediately looked up.

"Don't stop," he muttered indistinctly, wrapping his arms around him tighter.

Phil smiled apologetically.

"I thought you were already asleep," he explained, running his fingers up and down again along his spine. Techno just hummed, clearly not taking his excuse enough.

"I was asleep," he admitted, yawning widely. "But then you stopped."

So this time Phil didn't stop, even as the light outside slowly started to dawn. Not when the alarm clock rang, and it silenced it with one click. Not even when Wilbur slipped under the covers and snuggled against his other side. Work could wait. School could wait. He had everything he needed with him. And he was just going to enjoy it.

## Author's note

Hi.

We need to talk.

Okay, now everyone chill, it's nothing bad, I promise XD

So! Lots of people ask about Tommy (which is totally fine) and I've been wondering about it (for a while) and finally decided to split this story into two separate ones. Because of a few reasons.

First: Words count. Christ, I never thought this fic would be so damn long! I know that many people don't mind this, but personally I'm usually afraid of such long fanfiction. Irony, I know, lol.

Second: time skip. It will be much easier for me to just start my story elsewhere. For the curious: Techno and Wilbur will be thirteen years old (and Tommy six).

Third: changing the narrative. The second part focuses on Techno, so much so that I wouldn't be able to present everything from Phil's perspective. There are a limited number of conversations one person can eavesdrop on lol.

Fourth: mood changes. As I wrote in one of the comments, if this fic is "Hurt/comfort", the second part is more "Angst with happy ending". I'll be focusing more on the fact that puberty sucks, especially if you have a lot of traumas and attachment issues.

Sooo... Yeah, I think it's all!

Thank you all for your support! Love you guys!

# Chapter 36

## Chapter Notes

Hello there, @Katricia helped me with this chapter, so everyone thank her!

Phil knew he wasn't a particularly strict father. In fact, he never had the ambition to be one. Growing up, he had far too many friends who were so afraid of their own parents that they preferred to try to cope with everything on their own rather than ask for help or admit a mistake. Most of the time it didn't end too well. Of the two bad things, he sometimes preferred to turn a blind eye to some behaviors and not demand from the two ten-year-olds that they would always and everywhere behave perfectly. He never expected miracles, had no high expectations, and always tried to explain why he put more emphasis on certain issues than on others. So he was convinced that when he set limits, his children understood perfectly well that he was doing it solely for their own good. Don't touch the stove, don't run with scissors, don't talk to strangers, carry an inhaler with you, be at home at the appointed time... Very simple, sensible rules. If he wanted to, he could present in detail why each of them is so damn important. Including photos and police reports.

He believed his boys were smart and responsible enough to avoid such a presentation. And this is probably where he made a mistake.

It's not that Wilbur has everbeen very punctual. Time was a very fluid concept for him, and five minutes one way or the other only made a difference to him when he woke up in the morning. So Phil was not really surprised when the boys didn't show up at six pm exactly. It was Friday, snowing a lot, Dream had promised to bring his new sledge, and Wilbur had made a plan in three seconds to make it stop being his. It would be stranger if in the frenzy of fun they didn't lose track of time.

But by the time the clock read a quarter past Phil was a little less calm. He opened the living room window so that he could lean out and look down the street, but there was no living spirit anywhere in the neighborhood. Although the weather had been fine in the afternoon, the wind had picked up now and Phil was shivering from the cold after a few seconds. He didn't like the ideaof his children in such freezing cold at all. Especially since he knew perfectly well how wet their clothes must be after several hours of rolling in the snow. They'll be cold and they won't stop chattering until they're wrapped in a thick layer of blankets, whining at every turn. And if either of them tries to get sick again... Phil will take care of him with exactly the same concern as he always does. But he'll be very dissatisfied about it!

He boiled water for tea, mostly to keep his mind occupied, but even when the two steaming mugs were on the table, the two soaked latecomers still didn't show up at the door. Phil waited another minute, then reached for the phone with a heavy sigh. He dialed Wilbur's

number, but at the first ring he knew he was trying for nothing - somewhere near the couch he heard a familiar melody.

He found a phone in the couch cushions where it had probably slipped during one of the boys' scuffles. Phil had no idea whether he should laugh or cry. His son apparently had no predisposition to become addicted to technology. However, he had a great chance to find himself in trouble one day and not be able to call for help. Just great.

He leaned out the window one more time, his anger slowly building up inside him. He understood a few minutes late, but twenty? He hoped they were having a really good time tonight because he didn't plan to let them out for the next month. Or at least until Wilbur looked at him and made that face of his that Phil could never refuse.

He slowly began pacing in the living room, circling between the window and the kitchen, absolutely unable to sit still. Why didn't these things happen in summer when it was bright and warm? But okay, there was no point in getting into it. Knowing his kids, they just forgot and are now running down the main street, shouting about whose fault it was. Or they managed to catch the last bus that happened to be stuck in a traffic jam. Alternatively, one of the friends' parents took them all in one go, and Phil's house was accidentally selected for the last stop. These things happen and there's no need to get upset. Not at all.

Another fifteen minutes passed and "the bus is in a traffic jam" smoothly turned into "the bus hit a tree and it wrapped itself around it like a pretzel."

He reached for the phone again, this time searching for Schlatt's contact. The boy picked up on the third ring and seemed bloody surprised.

"Phil?"

"Hey, Schlatt." He decided to get straight to the point. "Is Wilbur there with you? He forgot his phone."

For a moment, all he heard was silence.

"Oh. But I'm already at home..."

He sounded almost embarrassed, and under other circumstances, Phil would have taken a moment to reassure him that he was under no obligation to watch over each of his friends. But for the moment he was a little busy dying of fear.

"Do you remember who else was with them?" Instead of leaning out the window, this time he went outside, in slippers, his jacket thrown casually over his shoulders.

"Dream and Sapnap and... I guess everyone in general. No, Karl had to go earlier. But Dream was there for sure, because they were arguing about something, as always."

"They haven't come back yet?" Clay asked two minutes later when Phil finally found his number on his son's phone. "We left them like this an hour ago. It's cold."

Phil watched his breath steam and tried not to think about any of the million nightmarish scenarios that came to his mind. Cold, indeed. Cold and dark and slippery and...

"They were left alone?"

Clay hesitated.

"I don't remember, I really don't. Sorry... What?" There were two muffled voices on the other side. Apparently the boy had put his hand over the receiver. "Ah. Sapnap says that Eret invited them to his place."

Phil wasn't sure what he felt more strongly at that moment - relief or anger. It was nearly six-forty, and if his boys were calmly sitting at a friend's house, when he was dying of fear, he was going to go there and murder them both on the spot.

Unfortunately, he doesn't get to make that choice.

"They left a while ago." Eret's voice showed that he was also concerned. Though his fear was certainly not even close to the absolute panic in which Phil was pacing the street, still without the proper shoes. "Wilbur wanted us to finish building our fort, but my parents won't let me go, and Wil got upset."

Phil stopped abruptly.

"Fort?" He repeated in a sudden rush of hope. "What fort? Where is it?"

Eret, as probably the only one of his children's friends, had the sense to describe the place a little more accurately than "somewhere in the woods." Although it was completely unnecessary, because this loose description was enough to make Phil lose all control over his imagination. His boys. In the forest. In complete darkness. He didn't even know what was worse: the thought that one of them might get hurt and no one would hear a cry for help, or maybe knowing that they might not be alone at all.

The only thing that stopped him from driving the car right there was that he didn't take the keys from the house. He had to step back inside, and that was the only reason why he wasted precious seconds in putting on his shoes. More seconds were spent scribbling a note he left in the hall along with Wilbur's phone, in case the boys came home while he was away. He had just fired up the engine and was about to reverse in the driveway when his own phone rang. He reached for it with trembling hands, praying silently that it would be neither the police nor anyone from the hospital.

It wasn't the police or the hospital. It was Darryl.

"Sapnap said Wilbur and Techno are gone," he said without preamble.

Phil really didn't know if he was more grateful to have someone to keep him sane or more ashamed of the fact that a man would witness his hysteria for the second time. This time, at least, he had a good reason, and probably nobody would be surprised.



"They were supposed to be home an hour ago." His hands tightened on the steering wheel. He was absolutely sure that as soon as he loosened his grip, they would tremble. And the cold will have very little to do with it. "They were at Eret's, but they left, supposedly to build a fort."

"That hut in the woods? Oh God..."

"I'm going to look for them. Can you guide me? I don't know how much I understood where to go. I'm temporarily losing my mind."

The good news was that his kids did have a bit of brains after all. Their fort, a jumble of sticks, branches, and heaps of snow, was just off the main road, and light from the streetlamps caught it.

The bad news was that there was no living spirit in it.

"Do you have any other idea where they might be?" Darryl asked, and although Phil knew he was just trying to help, he felt like throwing the phone at a tree anyway. Because no, he had no idea, but a million new visions of what might have happened.

"What if they got into a car with someone?" He looked around helplessly, though he himself didn't know what he was looking for. The bodies? Blood in the snow? "They might have been scared that I would be angry that they were late. Someone might stop and they might be fooled, or-"

"Wilbur would never do that," Darryl interrupted. His voice was calm, and it somehow helped Phil to keep his nerves under control. Those few nerves that still existed. "Once I saw him near the park and stopped to ask if I could give him a lift. But he had only just started to be friends with Sapnap and he probably didn't recognize me. In any case, he ran away very quickly."

Phil wasn't at all sure if the story had calmed him down, because okay, his kids might not have climbed into a car of their own accord, but that didn't mean they didn't end up in one. But at least it gave him an idea and some hope.

"They might be in the park."

They weren't in the park. Or at the bus stop. Or at any of the nearby stores. Phil tried to question every person he encountered, but no one saw any of his sons. And Techno was fucking distinctive. It was almost eight o'clock. Phil was damned sure that if he only allowed himself to sit down for a second, he would be totally hysterical. As long as he ran around, calling the children and questioning passers-by, while Darryl reassured him, gave him more ideas, he managed to keep his emotions in check, but he knew all too well that the first moment he was left alone would break him completely.

"Maybe they went home?"

Phil sank heavily into the driver's seat. It took three tries to hit the ignition key, his hands were shaking so badly. Not that it mattered, because he had no idea where else to go.

"I left them a note telling them to call me immediately. I would know if someone tried to connect with me."

Darryl didn't seem so convinced of it.

"Maybe they're scared? Sappap wouldn't call. He would sit in his room and enjoy the last minutes of his life."

Now that he had actually thought about it, the note he had left might have sounded a bit... aggressive.

"Okay. Maybe you're right." He finally managed to start the engine and took a deep breath to calm himself down a bit. It won't help if he puts the car in a ditch or ends up in a tree. "Can you... stay on the line? I think I need someone to talk to me."

In fact, he needed a lot of things at this point. Melissa, some good sleep, and above all - his boys, alive and well, so that he could breathe a sigh of relief, hug them, and then strangle them one by one. But he obviously couldn't count on that little grace from the universe, because when he burst into the house, the note and the phone were exactly in the same place, and there was no sign of any jackets or shoes in the hall. Just in case, he checked upstairs, calling out to his sons, hoping that maybe they were hiding out of fear somewhere. But the house was empty, the lights on the second floor were off, and there were still two mugs of cold tea on the kitchen table. Phil immediately poured it down the sink and leaned heavily against the counter.

Darryl gave him a few seconds to calm down before speaking again, calmly but firmly.

"Look, I really don't want to say this, but I think you should call the police."

Phil rubbed the corners of his eyes, partly to keep his hands busy, partly to keep the tears from rising for a moment.

"Yes, you're right," he admitted in an almost indifferent voice. The only way not to go mad with despair was to block all emotions and focus on action. Even if he wasn't sure how long he would have enough strength. "I just have to-"

He paused, straightening up sharply. For a second, a long, terrible second, he thought he had only misheard, but then the sound repeated, closer this time. Creaking snow on the front lane, quick steps and two hushed voices. The front door swung open and Phil practically lunged toward the sitting room, pausing just as abruptly in the middle, staring at the two boys in the hall. Flushed, soaked and out of breath, but safe.

"They're back," he said when his voice finally returned, and immediately ended the call, dropping the phone on the couch.

The boys exchanged concerned glances.

"Hi." Wilbur smiled hesitantly, squeezing Techno's hand. "I know we're late, but-"

He broke off as Phil reached them in three strides, falling to his knees and locking them in a firm embrace. They were as cold and wet as they looked, but it made absolutely no difference as they were here, with him, safe, *alive*...! He could hear their breathing, and their hearts racing, and feel Wilbur's hand tightening on the sleeve of his jacket. For a moment, for a few seconds, everything was just as it should be, and he allowed himself to sink into boundless relief.

Then there was anger.

He pushed the children away from him and, gripping their shoulders tightly, looked at both of them at once, then each one individually. The more he saw no injuries, the more angry he felt. They were safe and sound. Nobody kidnapped them, they weren't hurt, there was absolutely nothing giving them the right to turn his life into hell for two damn hours and not even look embarrassed about it!

Wilbur flinched as he glanced at the hand on his shoulder, and Phil loosened his grip a little, but didn't withdraw it.

"Where were you?" He drawled, using up the last of his willpower to keep from screaming right away.

The boys looked at each other once again, clearly leading some mute scuffle over who should jump into the lion's mouth first. Phil really didn't have the patience for this.

"Where were you." He repeated, and this time it was not even a question, but a demand for immediate clarification.

Wilbur swallowed.

"On the beach?" He replied, lowering his shoulders as Phil's eyes widened in silent shock. "Karl said it was so cold the lake must have frozen over. We wanted to see it.. But we didn't go into the water!" He added quickly and Phil almost laughed because yes, of course, *that changed things completely!*

"Well, that's great. I am very glad that you have enough sense not to kill yourself on purpose."

"We just..." Techno apparently thought he should speak, too, but one sharp look silenced him.

"You were supposed to be home two hours ago. Do any of you have any idea how afraid I was for you? One thing. I asked for *one thing*."

Wilbur frowned.

"But..." he began, as if he thought there were any words he could justify this with. As if he had the right to argue about who was right. As if he didn't understand he did something fucking irresponsible!

It took no more for Phil to lose all his patience.

"I was losing my goddamn mind!" He screamed, and both boys jumped. "Do you know how many things could have happened to you? And do you know how many of them came to my mind? *Fucking all of them!*"

He sprang to his feet, looking down at two faces pale with fear. For the moment it didn't make any impression on him. For the moment, he wanted to grab both of them and shake them, hoping that maybe then something would get to them and start treating him seriously. He tried to be nice, he tried to be patient and understanding, but apparently sometimes it just wasn't enough. He took a deep breath to control himself a little.

"You were given one simple rule, what overwhelmed you so much? What was so fucking hard about being on time? Is it really too much for you to stop for two seconds and think about what you're doing?"

Wilbur opened his mouth to speak, but was unable to say anything. Techno tugged at his elbow, trying to stand in front of him, but Wilbur only moved closer to Phil, reaching out his hand as if he was simultaneously seeking physical contact and was afraid he might actually get it. Not in the form he asked for.

"We forgot," he finally managed, in a trembling, tearful voice. "I'm sorry..."

Phil almost laughed. Almost. He would have laughed had he not started seeing red.

"You forgot! Oh, yes, so that's great! Not a problem at all!" He raised his voice again, and this time Wilbur stepped back, hiding behind his brother. Techno stood there, straight as a string, but though his expression was neutral, the last of the color had drained from his face. "I've been looking for you all over town! I had to call all your friends because neither of you had the brains to even call! Wilbur, I swear if you leave your phone at home again..." He broke off, not quite sure how he actually wanted to finish that sentence. As it turned out, he didn't have to do it, because Wilbur clearly told himself the next part, judging by his face. "You're completely irresponsible and neither of you will put even the tip of your shoe outside this house until I believe that something has changed in that regard. And I'm very far from that. And yes, I'm angry," he added, looking at his younger child. "I'm absolutely fucking furious! At both of you!"

He took a deep breath, preparing to scream further. And then one more and another. It was only on the fourth that he felt that although his anger was still bubbling up in him, he no longer had the strength to give it any outlet. All the burden of the last hours, all the fear, and the overwhelming helplessness and guilt, over what a terrible father he was, if he couldn't even watch over his own children - it all had accumulated and he suddenly felt just so bloody tired.

He backed away, sitting down heavily on the stairs, his face in his hands.

"Go upstairs," he ordered. His own voice, even to him, seemed cruelly cold and harsh. "Both of you."

He heard a sniff and felt a cold hand on his shoulder.

"Phil, I'm sorry, I really-"

He brushed Wilbur's hand away without even looking up.

"Wilbur. I love you, I really do, but please get out of my sight now."

For a moment he only heard two rapid breaths. Then sobbing and the patter of feet on the stairs. Techno passed him seconds later, and Phil almost expected him to try to say anything, be angry or hysterical, as he used to do before. But the older boy said nothing and that was a million times worse, but fully deserved.

He wasn't sure how long he had been sitting on the stairs. Twenty or thirty minutes could have gone by, and it was definitely long in his head. He couldn't say he felt calmer. More burned out and empty, unable to evoke any emotions. Perhaps it was some sort of defense mechanism to keep him from losing his mind, but to tell the truth, he didn't really care about that at the moment.

He struggled to his feet, making his way to the kitchen without thinking. He turned on the water a second time and made tea. He hardly thought about what he was doing, his movements were completely mechanical, and he found he had no idea at what point he started making sandwiches. He put them on the tray next to the two mugs. He might be angry, he might even be furious, but that didn't change the fact that his children returned home frozen after a few hours in the cold, and most likely starving to death. He hadn't spent months convincing Wilbur that he didn't have to deserve his food in order for all that work to go to hell in one outburst of anger.

It didn't surprise him at all when he heard two muffled voices coming from behind the door of Wilbur's room. Even less surprising was that when he knocked, they both fell silent immediately, and Techno opened the door. The boy wasn't looking at him, keeping his head down, one hand clenched tightly on the doorknob, the other on the sleeve of his sweater. Only when Phil pushed the tray a little closer did he hesitate to take it and looked up. If he wanted to say something, he didn't get a chance because Wilbur appeared behind him, leaning out cautiously. His face was red and wet with tears, and when he tried to wipe his cheeks with his sleeve it became clear that his hands were still shaking. He looked at the tray, at Phil, at the food again, and inhaled loudly, immediately beginning to cry.

Phil didn't back away as his son practically threw himself into his arms, hugging him tightly around the waist, but neither did he do anything to return the hug in any way. Seeing the kid like this broke his heart and he knew full well that Wilbur needed reassurance at this point, he needed to hear that everything would be fine and confirmation that even if Phil was angry with him at this point, it didn't change the fact in any way that he loves him and cares for him more than anything else in the world.

The problem was, he couldn't bring himself to do it. Maybe because he was still furious, and he was afraid that if he tried to start a conversation, he would scream again. Maybe because he was damn disappointed and just couldn't bring himself to feel any warmth. Or maybe deep down he really did think the boy didn't deserve consolation yet. At any rate, for whatever reason, after a few awkward seconds he took the child by the shoulders and pulled him away, gently but firmly.

Wilbur looked at him with wide eyes, his arms slumping limply along his body. Phil looked at Techno.

"Eat and go to bed, okay?" He nodded at the plate and, without waiting for an answer, turned towards the stairs.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Techno grab Wilbur by the arm and haul him inside, closing the door. He tried very hard not to think about it.

He knew he should call Darryl and say thank you, but he postponed it to the morning, hoping a little sleep would help him organize his emotions and thoughts. He tried to focus on anything else, but after staring at the TV for an hour, he realized he had no idea what program he was watching. Color images jumped in front of his eyes, but he didn't catch any plot, so he finally gave up, closing his eyes and tilting his head. Some time before he had heard the hum of a shower from above, but now the house was almost completely silent. Normally at this hour both boys were in the middle of "I don't feel like sleeping at all!" phase, and he wouldn't be able to get them to bed for any treasures in the world, not on Friday night. But when he went to check, the silence more than a little ominous, he found both of them sleeping on Wilbur's bed, cuddled up against each other. He turned off the light and closed the door as softly as he could, backing out into the corridor. The more he thought about it, the more he began to feel guilty and the more remorse he felt. Not so much for the outbursts of anger as for how he later turned away his children with full premeditation. Children who have been rejected so many times in their lives and who until now believed that they could expect something better from him.

Great. Quite brilliant. Now he was angry and tired and disappointed with himself. The weekend couldn't have started better.

He didn't sleep well that night. In fact, he had hardly slept at all, but even those few hours of rest was enough to wake him up with the idea that he'd fucked up. Did his children deserve to hear everything he had to say to them last night? Yes, they did. But that didn't mean he could forget that they both had extremely difficult experiences behind them and that they reacted more strongly to some things than their peers. He wanted very much to forget the horror they had been staring at him with. Even more he wanted to forget Wilbur's crying and the way Techno was clearly trying to protect him, as if he really expected that Phil might not be limited to words.

He couldn't stand idleness any longer. He usually slept late on Saturday, allowing the boys to stay in bed longer as well, but he had a feeling that neither of them would want to laze around today. He put on his robe and, trying to be as quiet as possible, went down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

He was just taking a fourth pancake from the pan when he felt an intense gaze on him. He turned his head and shuddered when he saw Techno standing in the doorway. He knew that the boy could move extremely quietly when he wanted to, but it surprised him every time.

"Hi." He smiled, trying to summon a little joy out of himself. The boy didn't take his eyes off him, clearly looking for something. "Are you checking to see if I start screaming again?"

Techno nodded. "Oh. I'm not, so you can tell Wilbur it's safe for him to come downstairs." He turned the stove off, setting the pan down. "I'd like to talk to you two."

Techno nodded and turned away, but froze in a half-step and looked at him carefully.

"And you're not angry anymore?" he checked.

Phil had never expected this very question to become the curse of his life.

He hesitated, trying to soothe the child and answer honestly.

"I'm angry, but I promise not to scream."

The boy looked unconvinced, and as he disappeared upstairs, Phil half expected not to see him back too soon. So he breathed a sigh of relief when a moment later Techno came down the stairs, dragging his brother with him. Wilbur seemed as far from wanting to be anywhere near Phil as possible. He was visibly tense as he took his seat at the very corner of the couch, with Techno as his private shield, and immediately pulled his knees up to his chin, trying to occupy as little space as possible in the hope that everyone would forget his existence.

Phil, if at all possible, felt even worse immediately. He looked from one child to the other a few times and finally sighed heavily, knowing he couldn't put off talking forever.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," he began, hoping it would calm them down a bit. Techno frowned in surprise, but Wilbur only rested his forehead against his knees. "But I had a good reason, you deserved it, and I think you know it yourselves. I was dying of fear for you. I was sure that something bad happened, you can't even imagine how many horrible things could happen to you."

Wilbur wrapped his arms around his legs tighter.

"I really forgot," he stammered, and on the one hand, Phil wanted to hug him and assure him that he understood, and on the other, to tell him once and for all that no excuse, even the best, would magically erase all the emotions he had to go through the night before. Ultimately, he opted for something in-between.

"Wilbur, I know you didn't do it on purpose. And I know these things just happen sometimes. But you often forget your phone at home. And not to mention walking to the lake at night." He paused for a moment, shifting his attention from Wilbur to Techno and back again. "Or should I mention it?"

For a few seconds both boys were silent, Wilbur still burying his face in his arms, Techno clenching his lips, staring at his feet.

"It was stupid," he finally admitted as the silence began to become unbearable.

Phil nodded.

"It was. Really, really stupid. And I stand by what I said: you are both extremely irresponsible. I believed you were much smarter, but I can see that was a mistake, so until

you can prove you deserve my trust, you two go home right after school. And I don't want to hear a word about it, okay?"

Wilbur finally looked up and for a second he looked as if he wanted to protest now. But then he looked at Techno and he must have exchanged a whole series of telepathic messages with him, because he just grimaced and nodded very reluctantly.

"Fine," he muttered, and yesterday Phil would be completely satisfied with it. But it so happened that a few hours earlier his parenting methods had led him to the brink of a heart attack, so, exceptionally, he was very far from being satisfied.

"No, Wilbur, not 'fine'. I am not negotiating with you - I am informing you" he said, watching carefully as the boy immediately loses his confidence and willingness to discuss further. He looked at his older child. "All clear?"

Techno shrugged.

"If you say so..."

"I say so," he nodded. So much for the easier part of the conversation. It's time to grit his teeth, set a good example, and admit his mistakes. "Okay, now that we've established that I had every right to be absolutely mad at you guys because one day you'll really put me in the grave, let's also talk about what I shouldn't be doing. I shouldn't have yelled at you." He held up a hand, counting points on his fingers. The boys exchanged glances, Wilbur hopeful, Techno clearly confused. "I shouldn't be swearing in front of you. And I shouldn't have left you alone afterwards. I was angry with you, but I had no right to use your emotions and needs to punish you." He lingered a little longer on Wilbur. "I'm sorry."

The boy shifted uneasily.

"I wasn't mad at you," he muttered, not looking in his direction. "I just... didn't understand. You brought us food." He frowned. "So you weren't angry. But then you were again."

At times, Phil wondered how beautiful the world would be if Wilbur had been fortunate enough not to be part of his last family.

"I could be mad at you all week and you would still get food," he assured, for the time... he himself had no idea which. "We talked about it, remember?"

Wilbur nodded, hesitated, and looked at him uncertainly.

"Can I hug you now?"

"Of course." Phil held out his hands to him automatically. "Always."

It took the boy exactly two seconds to jump off the couch and climb onto his lap.

"I couldn't yesterday," he said, snuggling into him as if it were going to be the first and the last time. Phil closed his eyes, wincing as he was crushed by an avalanche of remorse.



"I'm sorry 'bout that," he sighed, brushing his dark hair with one hand and holding the other out toward the older child. "Techno?"

The boy didn't even hesitate, immediately bumping his nose into his robe. Phil leaned in to kiss his hair.

"I shouldn't yell at you," he repeated, because with every moment he had them with him, so damned hungry for any kind of affection, he was forgetting more and more why he should be angry with them at all.

Techno rested his chin on his shoulder to be able to look at him.

"You weren't yelling," he said, which was quite strange because Phil remembered very clearly that yes, he did. His throat was still sore.

"I was."

Techno shook his head.

"You have no idea how bad people can yell. You weren't even angry. Not like, really angry."

Phil hesitated, not sure which side to approach the subject from. And does he even want to touch something that smells for a kilometer away.

"Okay." He exhaled slowly. "What does 'really angry' mean?"

"Really angry means they'll send you back," Wilbur interjected, and Techno immediately nodded to him.

"Or that you have to hide, or if they find you, it will hurt. Bad."

Ah. Just as he suspected. And he couldn't shut up and live blissfully unaware...

"I guess you guys had to hide a lot?" He asked masochistically, glancing from one to the other and pulling them a little closer together.

Wilbur nodded.

"Under the bed."

Techno just grimaced.

"That's a stupid place. I did that once, but they dragged me out by my hair." He reached back as if to make sure his braid was safe and completely safe. "It wasn't worth it."

Phil knew he shouldn't. He knew he would blame himself if the truth only hurt him. But he also knew that if he didn't know the answer, it would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Did you hide yesterday?"

Both boys seemed equally surprised.

"No?" Wilbur glanced at his brother for a hint, but Techno just frowned. "What for?"

"It was just you. Wilbur was crying a little, but that was all. I dealt with it."

Wilbur's face was utterly indignant.

"I wasn't crying at all!" He squeaked, earning an incredulous look.

"Well, I saw it."

"You saw shit! I just... I just wanted to be nice!" He crossed his arms over his chest, lifting his chin high. "I didn't want you to feel stupid that you're the only one sad. I was pretending because I'm so nice!"

"You said Phil hates you and you wanted to pack your things!"

"It's 'cause I was nice!"

"I had to take your backpack!"

"Because I'm nice!" He shouted back and took a deep breath, clearly getting ready for further argument, but he stopped immediately when the arms around him wrapped a little tighter. He glanced up, frowning. "Phil? You're good?"

"Mhm." Phil rested his forehead against the dark hair, closing his eyes for a moment. "After hearing all this? I'm much better! For a moment I thought I was a terrible father, but now? I feel great!" He sighed heavily, straightening up, looking from one child to another. "Boys? Even if I was really angry at you, I would never send you back. You know that?"

Techno wasn't looking at him, busy picking up his trouser legs.

"I've only been here for four months," he muttered. "You haven't seen anything yet."

Phil must have put far too much effort to maintain at least a minimum of seriousness.

"Oh yeah? And what will you do, slam the door even more often?" He asked innocently.

"How terrible. I don't know how we'll survive this."

"You can always take it from him," Wilbur suggested, which was probably supposed to be a reward for an earlier comment, but the glint of fear in the older boy's eyes was a bit too real. Jokes are jokes, but certain boundaries should not be crossed. Not yet, anyway.

"Wilbur, I'm taking your phone too."

The boy nearly slipped off his lap, turning a little too abruptly.

"But why?"

"Because maybe when you miss it a little, you'll learn to remember to take it with you. You will get it in the morning before you go to school and give it back to me as soon as you get

back."

Wilbur puffed his cheeks and turned his back to him, which might even have been impressive if he had still not been sitting in his lap.

"It's not fair. I got it worst," he grunted and there was some truth in this. If Phil were to say in which of the boys disappointed him more yesterday, he would have no hesitation in pointing to Wil.

"Because I expected you to be the more responsible one," he explained patiently and was met with a complete lack of understanding as he had anticipated.

"Why me? Techno is older!"

"Yes, but you've lived with me longer. And you know how stressed I get when I don't know where you are or what is happening to you."

Wilbur grimaced, but since he could never hold a grudge for long, it only took a few seconds for his face to soften.

"I know," he muttered, pressing his back against him tighter.

Still, he seemed worried about something. He was laughing and mocking Techno and needed no encouragement to empty his plate at breakfast, but there was something disturbing about his demeanor. In the way he sometimes glanced at Phil with sudden apprehension, the way he suddenly fell silent and seemed sad whenever he thought no one was watching.

"I'll help!" He offered as soon as he finished eating, and before anyone could stop him, he scooped up the plates from the table and ran with them into the kitchen.

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"He's kind of weird," he said, then, lowering his voice to a whisper, he added "Can you make him be... normal again?"

Phil pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. He knew that this was an important moment and that by entrusting him with such an important task, Techno was really trusting him, but he couldn't help but find his awkwardness with choosing words endearing.

"I'll talk to him," he promised, ruffling his hair. "We'll see what we can do."

Wilbur had already run water down the sink, splashed it all over the place, and had about half a bottle of dishwashing liquid per fork. Phil carefully walked around the puddle forming on the floor to stand beside him with the cloth.

"You don't have to try so hard to make me happy, you know?" He joked, taking the first plate from the boy. "You're too cute to be angry with you, and you know it."

To his surprise, Wilbur didn't laugh. In fact, he seemed even more depressed. He lowered his hands, examining his hands under the thick layer of foam, and suddenly, without warning, his chin trembled and tears ran down his cheeks.

"Hey, hey! Phil immediately grabbed his shoulders, gently pulling him aside and started wiping his hands. "Kiddo, it's okay. Nothing's wrong, right?"

Wilbur nodded, but since his eyes were still wet, it didn't look particularly convincing.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered, and it was hard to say what exactly for.

Phil set the cloth aside so he could close the kid's hands in his.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm still a little angry because I was really scared for you and please don't ever do that to me again." He squeezed his fingers a little tighter, as if it could make him remember the lessons longer. "But it's okay."

Wilbur shook his head, quickly and violently.

"But that's not the point. I mean, I'm sorry for that too, but..." He sniffed and immediately wiped it on his sleeve. "Because... because Techno told you that I cried and that I was afraid that you would send us back and... And you probably feel bad now. Because you always feel bad when I do that."

The despair in his voice was so great and the sadness so sincere that for a moment Phil could only stare at him, stunned by the realization of how much his child loved him. And how fully mutual that feeling is. Theoretically, he had known it almost from the beginning, and he had always had the thought somewhere in the back of his head, but sometimes when he got such clear evidence of concern and affection, he still felt almost overwhelmed.

"Oh." He let go of one of Wilbur's hands so he could brush his fringe aside, trying to get him to raise his head. "Oh, Wilbur..."

The boy took another shuddering breath, then removed his hands from Phil's grasp and hugged him tightly.

"I really don't want to think like that," he whimpered, and Phil immediately hugged him back. Though he could no longer see his face, he knew all too well that the crying only intensified. "And Puffy says it's not my fault, but sometimes... Sometimes I'm still scared. And sometimes for no reason, and I don't understand it myself, and it's really unfair, because you would never do that, but... I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry..."

"Wilbur," Phil carefully pushed the child away from him. Just to be able to look him in the eye, but the way the boy looked at him, as if the separation had caused him almost physical pain, made him feel guilty anyway. "Okay. Wilbur, listen to me very carefully, okay? Puffy is right and I'm so glad you are listening to her. And I'm also glad you told me something was wrong." He waited a moment until the boy nodded slowly. "It's not your fault. You're not doing anything wrong."

Wilbur looked as far from believing his words as possible.

"But I was angry when Techno thought you would do something to him. And I do it too... sometimes."

Phil exhaled slowly. He had never expected that such a great responsibility would ever fall upon him. He had a child in front of him who treated his every word as undeniable fact and revealed truth - how could he not spoil it?

"Remember when we rearranged your room and you couldn't find anything after that? You opened the wrong drawer, because you were used to things lying in completely different places. Something similar happens in your head sometimes."

Wilbur frowned.

"In my head?" He repeated, wiping his cheeks with his sleeve. Phil breathed a sigh of relief. He might not be the best psychologist, but at least he managed to get the boy to stop crying.

"Mhm. And that's perfectly normal. When we're very used to something, we stop thinking about it and we do it completely instinctively. And sometimes, when something changes, it takes a long time to get used to it, even if it is a change for the better. So although your room is finally clear... to some extent," he grimaced and a shadow of a smile flashed across Wilbur's face, "you happen to be looking in the wrong drawer." He took the kid's face in his hands, wiping the tears from his cheeks with his thumbs. "Someone hurt you once, Wilbur. Someone has hurt you horribly and treated you badly for so long that you get used to it. And even if it's better now, sometimes you'll react like you did before." He looked into the boy's eyes for understanding, and when he saw the last remnants of hesitation in them, he sighed heavily. "Lots of drawers of different feelings and reactions. Right here." He brought their foreheads together. "And sometimes the wrong one opens. And it's absolutely not your fault."

He couldn't be sure Wilbur fully understood. Even if he did, he didn't think it had solved the problem once and for all. But the way the child immediately snuggled into him made him believe that, at least temporarily, he had stalled the crisis.

Maybe even more than one crisis, because when he looked up, Techno was standing in the doorway, watching them closely. He had an unreadable expression as Wilbur stepped back to wipe his nose on his sleeve again, and seized the opportunity and slipped between them.

Phil laughed as he stood up and ruffled both their hair.

"Can I still get help with the dishes?"

Wilbur wrinkled his nose.

"Nooo... I'm not sad anymore."

"I can help," Techno suddenly suggested, taking a step towards the sink. But he immediately stepped back, looking at his wet socks in disgust. "Why is there so much water?"

Wilbur made a face at him.

"Toady."

Techno threw the cloth at him.

# Chapter 37

## Chapter Notes

Yooooooo! @Katricia helped me with this chapter, very POG!

The next chapter gonna be... emotional. Sooo... take this fluff while you can!

Also! My sister just add another story, here, take this, it's so fucking good!

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/32623297/chapters/80925907>

Here, we made you some content!

Techno didn't like Christmas. Phil wasn't particularly surprised, especially since Wilbur hadn't been overjoyed at the thought of it a year earlier either.

"Everyone ignores you on Christmas," he once explained, sitting on the couch in his bathrobe while Phil dried his hair after the boy challenged Dream to a snowball fight and failed miserably. "But like... *more* . So that you know they're ignoring you for you to be sad."

Phil hesitated, not sure what to say.

"I'm sure they didn't do it on purpose," he lied at last, because while he had absolutely no intention of making excuses for the people he genuinely despised for a million reasons, he also didn't want the boy to feel sad. No more than before, anyway.

Wilbur tilted his head to look at him over shoulder .

"They did," he assured, leaving no room for any discussion. "They really did. And then a lot of people I didn't know were coming. And they always talked about me as if I wasn't there. And once, one aunt... she wasn't really anyone's aunt, she was just weird... and once she looked at me and said, 'If it were up to me, you wouldn't be here anymore'," he mocked in a high, squeaky voice. "And I said 'If it was up to me, I wouldn't be here either.' And then I couldn't eat dinner." He paused for a moment, giving Phil just enough time to experience a small nervous breakdown over the fact that the only honest comment he could think of is highly obscene and definitely not suitable for a child's ears. "Can we go see the Christmas tree in town tomorrow? Dream has already seen it."

This year, Phil didn't need a reminder to know when the Christmas decorations appeared in the main square. He even wrote down the date on the calendar so as not to accidentally forget it. He might be an adult and not quite understand the rivalry between the boys, but even he was getting some sort of satisfaction from Wilbur seeing the tree before Dream. And since there was an opportunity to show Techno a slightly nicer side of Christmas, so much the better.

"It's... big," said the boy, rocking on his heels. He stood beside Phil, hands in his pockets, while Wilbur, for reasons only he knew, ran around the tree, weaving between passersby and counting laps aloud.

"Mhm. It's impossible to hide."

"And..." Techno wrinkled his nose. "It shines."

Phil nodded, trying very hard not to laugh. There was something damn cute about how persistently Techno tried to have a very adult conversation with him, although he clearly would have preferred to join his brother in... whatever he was doing. In fact, as Phil thought a little deeper about it, Techno had been remarkably quiet and calm for the last few days. So much so that Wilbur called him 'boring' several times and took offense for several minutes.

"Will we also have a Christmas tree?"

"Mhm. I think I'll go to the store tomorrow. I couldn't miss the traditional standing in giant queues." Techno smiled, although it was obvious that he didn't quite understand the joke. Apparently, he had never experienced the pre-Christmas shopping rush. It had to be fixed quickly. "Do you want to go with me?"

The boy hesitated.

"Will it be a good thing if I go?" He asked, and okay, Phil understood a lot, but at this point he was starting to get a little lost.

"I'll be glad to have company," he replied anyway, and Techno immediately nodded.

"Then I want to."

Perhaps it was just one of those things that ceased to make sense beyond a certain age and Phil would never fully understand them again, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was playing some strange, unnecessarily complicated psychological game. Like when Wilbur wouldn't leave the house all week because he was afraid to admit that he had dirtied his new shoes.

As if confirming his theory, Techno rocked on his heels and suddenly fired:

"It will be... a tree like in the movies?"

Phil had no idea how specifically to understand this question, so he chose the most general answer possible just in case.

"I think so? We have some baubles and lights at home. Last year, Wilbur made a lot of paper ornaments himself, so they were very... creative. And original."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"You always say that when he makes something ugly."



Wilbur chose just that moment to run past them at full speed, shouting "Twenty-seven!" Phil watched him go, trying not to think about the fact that he was about to trip and hit the concrete with his chin.

"He's having a good time, that's the most important thing."

"If you say so..." Techno just shrugged. He seemed increasingly tense and took a deeper breath every now and then, as if he was getting ready to say something, but it wasn't until the fourth time that he actually did. "There are usually gifts under the Christmas tree." He pushed his hands harder into his pockets. "In the movies, I mean."

It took Phil a full two seconds to understand. And then another three to keep it straight and not to laugh. Sometimes he forgot that his sons' lives, thank God, weren't just about traumas and that they happened to be just kids. With completely normal, childish ideas and needs.

"I think so, yes."

Techno pursed his lips, clearly expecting some expansion of the topic.

"So there will be gifts?" he asked.

Phil was taking too much pleasure in teasing him. His only defense was that provoking him was too easy.

"Yhm..."

The boy stepped nervously from foot to foot.

"For me too?" He asked, looking so hopeful that this time Phil couldn't help but smile.

"For you, too," he nodded, putting his arm around the kid and pulling him to his side. "Of course for you too. Is that why you've been acting so strange lately?"

"Twenty eight!" Wilbur shouted, this time taking a second to slap his brother on the shoulder. "Come on!"

Techno hesitated, visibly torn inside, and looked at Phil as if asking for permission.

"I was trying to be good" he explained, and there was a clear sense of the silent 'Can I stop now?'

"Oh. To deserve a gift?" The boy nodded. "I understand. Very clever. But you don't have to be so serious and quiet, you know? I can see that you're trying very hard."

He didn't just say it to cheer him up, he really appreciated the amount of effort Techno was putting into his work on himself lately, how he tried to control his tantrums, he put a lot more into his studies and was often even the voice of reason for Wilbur. But, while it was nice and bodes well for the future, he was still just a child and had the right to behave according to his age. Even if it meant running around and shouting more numbers.

Or tormenting his little brother.

"It's the ugliest thing you've ever made," he said hours later, glancing over Wilbur's shoulder. "And in general, you make a lot of ugly shit."

Wilbur gasped in indignation, so much so that for a moment he was unable to utter a word. He compensated for this by throwing a crayon at Techno.

"It's not ugly! Phil! Phil, tell him it's not ugly!"

Phil hadn't even looked up from the Christmas lights he'd been trying to untangle for several minutes, mentally cursing himself from a year ago for stuffing them in a cardboard box anyhow.

"Techno, don't tease your brother," he said over his shoulder, which, of course, had absolutely no effect. But at least he could say he had tried. As if. A little.

"I'm just being honest."

"You're mean!" Somewhere behind his back he heard two soft taps, probably announcing that Wilbur had tossed the crayon again, missed, threw a second, and hit the wall once more.

"And my picture is nice! Phil, tell him it's nice."

With a heavy sigh, Phil turned and craned his neck to at least pretend he was trying to look at the paper on the table.

"It's very nice," he praised, going back to unraveling the lights, half of which probably wouldn't work anyway, so he didn't know why he was getting tired at all. He could buy a new box right away and save time, but nooo, he wanted to take care of the environment...

Of course, Wilbur scowled, as he always did when he didn't get a hundred percent attention exactly the second he asked for it.

"You didn't even look," he muttered, and Techno, just as naturally, immediately seized the opportunity to make it even worse.

"He just doesn't want nightmares after seeing that. Or to go blind at the sight of it."

"Phiiiil!"

Phil closed his eyes for a moment. This is what he wanted, right? He wanted his sons to be brothers, and that's exactly what he got. With all its downsides and a few tiny pros somewhere in the background.

"Boys, that's enough," he asked, writing off the lights and going over to the table to restore peace or to die trying. "Techno, that was rude. Wilbur, stop taking offense about everything. And your picture is very..." He paused to look over his son's shoulder, but a random compliment died on his lips as he looked at the drawing. He blinked. "Oh."

He supposedly knew that with all his creativity and passion for creation, Wilbur has exactly as much artistic talent as a cat accidentally running over wet cement, but sometimes he was still surprised by the level of his abstractions.

Techno didn't even try to hide his amusement.

"You see?" He laughed out loud. "You killed him with it! I told you!"

Phil made a face at him over the younger child's head.

"I'm just surprised," he said forcefully, running a finger across his throat to let the boy know so that he would better keep the jokes to himself. Techno rolled his eyes, still grinning mischievously but at least made no comment. "It's very..." he tried to find the broadest possible words "colorful. And there are... nice things."

Wilbur scowled at him.

"You have no idea what's in it, do you?"

Techno hid his face in his hands, shaking in muffled laughter. Phil struggled to keep from following in his footsteps.

"No," he finally admitted when he could no longer bear the child's piercing glare. "Sorry kiddo, but no."

Wilbur folded his arms, leaning against the backrest with such force that the chair swayed dangerously.

"It's us," he muttered under his breath. "Our family."

Phil immediately felt stupid and looked at the picture again, this time much more favorably.

Techno stopped laughing.

"Which of these blots is me?!"

Phil would have scolded him for that, but even as he looked at the paper with sincere intentions, he still found it hard to find anything humanoid in the color spots.

Wilbur slumped even lower in his chair.

"None," he chuckled, kicking the leg of the table. "You're mean and I don't want you in my picture."

Techno immediately opened his mouth to reply, probably in a similar tone, but one sharp look was enough to change his mind.

"Okay, stop it now." Phil looked from one child to another, then to the paper. "Techno, I think that's you." He tapped a finger suspiciously at the small pink spot.

The boy followed his hand and grimaced.

"This is shi-" he began, but fell silent again under the silent threat. "Fine," he grunted, and leaned back in his chair as well. Phil wasn't sure if he was trying to mock his brother by copying his gestures, or if Wilbur had simply infused him with his drama. "But why am I the shortest?" He whined at Wilbur with obvious resentment. "I'm taller than you!"

Wilbur sighed loudly.

"It's an *art*, it doesn't have to be the way it really is," he explained in a superior tone. Phil was absolutely sure he would have called Techno 'ignorant' if he had only known the word. "And it's because you're the little brother, so you're the smaller one."

There was silence for a few seconds as everyone studied his words intently. There was something fascinating about Wilbur being able to make something quite logical while completely missing any facts.

"But I'm older!" Techno was the first to put it into words.

"But I was here first."

"And?"

"And Phil said so himself - I was here first so I'm older!"

Phil blinked in surprise.

"I literally never said that."

"You did!" Wilbur straightened sharply.

"He didn't!" Techno hit the table with his hand.

Phil rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. It was such a nice, quiet evening... And to think that he could have just let Techno laugh at the silly drawing and everyone could enjoy the blissful silence now...

"Can't you get along somehow?"

Wilbur lifted his chin high. He didn't look like he was planning to reach out for peace. More like getting ready for a war.

"If Techno admits I'm older."

That, of course, could not be counted on.

"I was born faster! That is literally the definition of being older!"

"And? I was here first. That's the definition of 'shut up, I'm right'."

"You could be..." Phil made a gesture in the air that he himself did not understand "equally or something. I don't know. Can you be twins?" He said the first thing that came to him in a fit of desperation.

Techno looked at him in almost comical surprise, but Wilbur seemed to take the proposition quite seriously, because he paused, analyzed something in silence for a moment, then nodded.

"I like it. It's fair."

Techno stared at him, and when no one responded, he stood up from the table without a word.

"This family is a nightmare," he said, running up the stairs. "You're both insane!"

And maybe they actually were a bit, because the picture ended up stuck to the fridge and Wilbur grinned every time he looked at it.

"I just don't understand," Phil ran his finger over the stain intended to represent him, "why I have wings here."

Wilbur looked at him superiorly.

"It's art, Phil. It's impossible to explain the art," he said, which probably meant that he didn't know it himself.

But maybe he was right and art should remain art. Not that Phil was thinking too deeply about it. Not when he could just smile at the children's scribbles and appreciate the message they carried.

He was starting to get used to the new atmosphere in the house. To constant noise, childish arguments and twice as much mess. To acting as a mediator, only to have the two boys join forces against him a second later. To buying everything in two identical copies, as long as he didn't want a little Apocalypse in the house. And to how Techno insisted that he wasn't a baby and could cross the road on his own, but grabbed his hand as soon as he saw Wilbur do it.

He was starting to get used to the thought that it would always be that way. That they'll have another Christmas, then another, and then another, and with a bit of luck, at some point, looking back, his children will only remember the good times. There was no way Phil could erase the wrongs that had been done to them once, and no matter what, bad memories were always going to stay deep in the hearts of both boys. But he could try to keep them from it being the first, most obvious thought. So that Wilbur would not associate Christmas with being ignored and humiliated. So that Techno would stop looking at him with such exorbitant surprise every time Phil bought them cookies and hot chocolate while walking. So that neither of them would have bad days anymore.

"It was me, sorry, I didn't mean to," was the first thing Phil heard as he left the kitchen to check what his kids had messed up this time.

There was a broken bauble on the floor between two pairs of feet clad in colorful socks. One of those Phil disliked and only hung from the Christmas tree out of habit. And a little bit

because he was too lazy to drive to the store for new ones. Normally, he would have probably joked about freeing the tree from one ugly thing, but at the moment he was much more concerned with the tone used by Techno than with any decoration. His voice was high, his breathing quick, and he practically spat the words out, as if afraid that if he was even a second late, he would lose his chance to explain. He had his shoulders tucked in, and he was looking more through than at Phil, his eyes wide, wide, terrified, not seeing him.

When he got no immediate answer, he clearly began to panic.

"It was an accident, really! But I'll clean it up, I promise...!" He crouched down, reaching for the remnants of the bauble, but Wilbur immediately grabbed his wrist.

"Leave it, you'll hurt yourself," he instructed, and if Phil hadn't had a million other thoughts and feelings in his head, he would have felt a tiny twinge of pride. Who would have thought, self-destructiveness could be cured after all. "And it wasn't you at all." He frowned, glancing at his brother in incomprehension. "Why are you lying?"

Techno opened his mouth and it was clear that he wanted to deny, that he was ready to tell Wilbur to shut up, keep quiet and let him take the blame. But then he looked up and saw Phil, really saw him, and his face softened instantly.

"Oh..." He relaxed his shoulders, but the fear was quickly replaced by confusion, and after a while he had to blink to stop the rising tears. "Cause I..." He looked at Phil as if he was asking for understanding and even expecting reproach. "I forgot. I forgot you don't-"

They didn't talk about it that night. They just sat on the couch, under a thick blanket, Techno between them, head resting on Phil's shoulder and hand in Wilbur's hand. Some things couldn't be put into words right away. Sometimes it took time and patience and a whole lot of warmth to feel safe enough to even start talking about them.

Therefore, no one was in any way surprised when the first soft mention of therapy ended in a lot of screams, and eventually Techno ran up the stairs and locked himself in the room, slamming the door beforehand. And slamming again. And again.

Phil grimaced as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Okay, I got it!" He called and, surprisingly, it actually got quiet.

Maybe even a bit too quiet, because the boy didn't come down for lunch or dinner. Plates left at the door were emptied clean, which was a good sign, but the whole thing was a bit too much like the first days of his stay at home for anyone to feel comfortable with it. So Phil breathed a sigh of relief when he was awakened a few hours later in the middle of the night by a violent shaking on his shoulder.

"I don't want to go to therapy," the child said with typical stubbornness. Then, much less confidently, he added, "But can I sleep with you tonight?"

Phil pushed back the covers without saying a word, letting the boy scoop up most of the pillow. Certainly, they were to come back to this topic. Maybe not now or even tomorrow, but

in some time, when the first emotions will subside a bit. He needed time and a lot, a lot of patience...

\* \* \*

"Phil, do you have any family at all?"

He looked up from his laptop, glancing at his older child. Both boys were lying on the couch, Techno with a book on his lap, Wilbur pretended to be drawing, in fact mostly just poking his brother with his foot in the shoulder.

"Yhm. Of course I do." Phil smiled broadly in response and pointed a finger first at one child, then at the other. "One and two. That's exactly two more people than I expected, to be honest."

Wilbur smirked, this time almost knocking out the Techno's eye with his foot, but he only pushed his leg back and knelt on the pillows so he could rest his elbows on the couch arm and see Phil better.

"You don't have parents?"

Ah. So it's time for some tough questions. Not that Phil wasn't expecting them, but maybe not today. It was by no means a special day, just none ever seemed 'right' to him. And probably none of them was ever supposed to, so what's the difference...

"No," he admitted, saving the file and setting his laptop aside.

Techno frowned.

"Why?"

Wilbur put down the paper and the crayons in a very dramatic gesture.

"Techno! You can't ask about that stuff!" He was indignant.

"Why not? Everyone always asks me."

Phil shook his head as he walked over to the couch so he could sit between them, placing the younger child's legs on his lap.

"All right, Wilbur. It's okay to ask. I would probably also be curious" he calmed down, but despite his own words, he hesitated before turning to Techno. "They died. Long time ago. There was... a car accident. And only I survived."

In just a few seconds, the boy's face went from curiosity to surprise to embarrassment.

"Oh," he muttered, focusing on tiring his own socks. "I didn't know..."

"Of course you didn't. I don't mention it too often."

And if he could, he would never have mentioned it. As if on cue, his forearm burned, and even though he knew it was just phantom pain and his own imaginations turned against him, he rubbed the scar through the fabric of his shirt.

Techno shifted uneasily.

"When was 'a long time ago'?"

Phil smiled slightly, because while he really didn't like to talk about it, he somehow enjoyed the boy's interest. Perhaps if a child starts to see him as an ordinary person, with completely normal human emotions, it will be easier for him to believe that he won't suddenly turn into another monster. There were far too many of them in his life.

"You weren't born yet," he replied, and feeling the expectant gaze on him, he clarified, "I was sixteen. Almost seventeen."

"And you were left... alone?"

He glanced between himself and his brother and didn't have to add anything else to make it clear what he really meant. It was hard to tell from his expression what answer he was counting on, and what would have made him happier: the thought that Phil somehow shared at least some of their experiences, or that he had managed to avoid them.

"No." As expected, the kid's face expressed relief, disappointment and a little jealousy at once. "My mother's family took care of me. They helped me a lot, but we've never... never been particularly close. I haven't spoken to them in years. But I think they would be glad to see us now."

Techno nodded, although it was obvious that his thoughts were already very far away. Not a very pleasant place, judging by the way he suddenly puffed out a sigh as he pulled his knees up to his chin and rested his cheek against it.

"I don't think my parents died. I think they just didn't want me," he confessed suddenly, softly but firmly, with a conviction so painful that Phil was willing to give up absolutely anything he could to honestly deny it.

Instead, he just squeezed his hand tightly, trying to put everything into that one simple gesture, from compassion to the promise that he would never, ever let him be alone again.

Wilbur tilted his head back and waved his legs in the air.

"My parents died and a lot of people didn't want me," he said completely indifferently, which on the one hand actually relaxed the atmosphere, and on the other hand pushed Phil through the dark tunnel called 'Where did I go wrong?'.

" *Christ* , Wilbur..."



"What? I wanted to fit in."

\* \* \*

Phil wasn't sure how he ended up writing a letter to his family. He had planned to send a simple postcard, like almost every year, except in the years when he had forgotten. But then he realized that it would be good for the boys to add their wishes as well. In that case, he should probably at least briefly explain that he went from being a lonely man to suddenly becoming a father to two gremlins.

"Can you tell them I'm the best in geography?" Wilbur stood on his tiptoes to peer over his shoulder just as Phil ran out of space on the postcard and, with a heavy sigh, decided to move over to a plain page and start all over again, a little less chaotically. "And that only I knew where Angola was."

"Nobody cares," Techno muttered over his book, and it was hard to tell if it was more about the country or his brother's successes as such. Just in case, Wilbur stuck out his tongue anyway.

"I would care."

"Because you're not normal."

"Wilbur is very normal and of course I will write about it." Phil stretched his hand back so he could ruffle the younger child's hair, while looking at the older one and unable to resist the temptation, he added with a little spite: "I could also write that your English teacher praises you very much, but since you think it doesn't matter..."

Techno flinched, and though he tried to pretend that he was still concentrating solely on reading, the tips of his ears flushed slightly.

"Well, I don't forbid you..." he muttered. "If you insist... But can you write that I beat Dream?"

Phil froze with the pen millimeters above the page.

"Did you fight with Dream?"

He wasn't even angry, just surprised he didn't know anything about it.

"No, but if I had fought him, I would have won."

Oh, okay, but everything's normal, it's just a heart attack endurance test, nothing new.

"Dream wanted to fight him," said Wilbur, sitting in the chair next to him and starting to color the envelope. "But he can't now because he's in trouble anyway. Someone said he

cheated at competitions. In racing. And Dream was terribly offended. And if he gets offended, he talks about it to everyone, so now teachers know too."

Phil broke away from writing to reflect a moment longer on what he had just heard.

"How can you cheat in races?" He asked, ignoring that his son seemed a little too amused by the whole situation. He wouldn't admit it out loud, but he also thought that who like who, but Clay, could be a lesson in humility.

The boy shrugged.

"I don't know. He was just running *too fast*."

Phil preferred not to pursue the topic. Especially since he had another problem on his mind.

"We don't have any family photos," he realized in surprise as he flicked through the photos on his phone, looking for at least one to add to the letter. He had way too many photographs of Wilbur, and recently he managed to capture a few moments when the boys were playing together, but he wasn't in any of them. Which on the one hand was not particularly strange, but on the other hand it automatically made him want to have something to frame and hang on the wall. "Come here."

It didn't take long to persuade Wilbur, but Techno grimaced as he looked at him with a martyr's face. For some reason, he really didn't like it when the camera lens was pointing at him.

"What do you need our photos for?"

"So that I have something to show to my friends when I praise you."

Wilbur beamed at him.

"Are you bragging about us?" He asked while his brother raised an eyebrow.

"You have friends?"

Phil scowled at him.

"I will ignore this completely unnecessary comment. And of course I brag about you. Techno, please. One photo and I'll leave you alone. And you'll get a bigger piece of cake if you smile."

Techno didn't smile. But he also didn't make his 'I Hate the Whole World' face, which was a significant advance in itself. Phil printed the photo in multiple copies, in case one mysteriously disappeared from the frame in the living room.

# Chapter 38

## Chapter Notes

I'm giving you this chapter with @Katricia help!

Here, some emotions, take it! (˘˘).o..\*♡

And then go read this:

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/32623297/chapters/80925907>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil wasn't surprised when he came down the stairs at seven in the morning at seven o'clock in the morning, being pulled by the hand of one child and urged on by the other one. Sleepy and cranky, certainly, but not surprised. He managed to make two cocoa and one very strong coffee, before the childrens' patience ran out and he was almost pushed into an armchair, from where he could admire how both boys dove under the Christmas tree to get all the parcels.

Wilbur didn't even scrutinize them, scooping them all up in a huge pile, but Techno turned each package in his hands and each time he glanced at Phil as if to be sure that no, it wasn't a mistake and his name wasn't there just by accident. Only then did he carefully places the gift aside and deal with the next one, more and more confused each time.

"That's... a lot," he finally said, as all the packages had been broken down into three piles. One of which differed significantly in size, but Phil didn't complain. At some point in their lives, everyone has had to come to terms with the fact that they start buying more gifts than they get. "Are you sure I can keep it all?"

Phil was pretty sure he'd heard the question before. And under very similar circumstances. Funny, but it didn't hurt any less the second time.

"Of course," he said, and only then did Techno relax a bit, sitting comfortably cross-legged and carefully unwrapping the first gift.

Beside him, Wilbur ripped the colored paper into a ball in one motion and tossed it casually somewhere behind his back.

"Phil! I got Lego!"

"Really? Who would have expected..."

While he would still much prefer to postpone the celebration to a less barbaric time, he couldn't honestly say that seeing the children happy and excited wasn't marginally better than

a few extra hours of sleep. Slightly.

"Phil! You're not opening yours!"

"Hm?" He looked away from Techno, who was pulling his new sweatshirt over his head, looking as if planned to never take it off again, and looked at his younger child. "Oh. Should I also open now?"

The boy nodded and moved closer to him on all fours, picking packages and after a while of searching he gave him a very crooked, shapeless... something.

"This is from me," he said, and the shapeless thing rose in value right away. "I did it myself."

The latter, in principle, didn't have to be added. It became all too obvious as soon as Phil unwrapped the paper and blue glitter sprinkled on his pants.

"Oh," he blurted out as he raised three pine cones stuck together, shimmering with a rainbow in the lamp's light.

"We made them at school." Wilbur, thank God, must have found his shock a mute delight. "And my teacher said mine are very original. And everyone else had to leave theirs in class, but she let me take them."

Somewhere behind his back, Techno coughed to hide his laughter. Phil had to bite his tongue to suppress the comment about teachers who obviously can be damn smart when they just want to get rid of some nasty stuff from sight.

"That's nice of her," he lied, twirling the cones in his fingers. Another batch of glitter sprinkled on the back of the armchair. He was never going to be completely rid of it in his life. "That, um... Has to... mean something?"

Wilbur looked at him incredulously.

"They're pine cones, Phil. Pine cones mean nothing."

Techno had to put his hand over his mouth, mute laughing. Phil tried to keep his gravity at all costs, but eventually he couldn't stand it either, hiding his face in his hands, probably smearing glitter all over his forehead.

"You're actually really weird sometimes, kiddo." He looked up and immediately laughed even louder at the boy's expression. And then he crouched down and hugged him tightly to make up for the laugh at least a little. "You're weird and I don't understand you at all, but I love you so much anyway."

Wilbur relaxed in his arms, clearly appeased at the last words.

"You better be," he snorted, grinning in a wide grin. "Do you know how long it takes to stick glitter?"

Phil poked his nose with his finger.

"Do you know how long it will take to get it off of everything around here?" He asked, only half-joking. Part of him was already dying at the thought of the slow cleaning agony that was to come.

But it will be later, in a few hours. Now he didn't have time to worry about it, because as soon as he straightened up, he felt Techno's eyes on him. The boy was staring at him with the same mix of uncertainty and jealousy as always when he found he was clearly getting less attention or affection, and while it was usually more a matter of Phil's caution than of actual bad intentions, this time it was hard to deny him a point.

"I've got something for you, too," he muttered suddenly, reaching into his pocket for a small package about the size of a hand. Apparently, he didn't find the wrapping paper, because he used a notebook page, but he had tied the whole thing with a very neat bow. He looked at his work again, glanced at the pile of presents next to him, and grimaced. "But... But you won't laugh, okay?"

Phil smiled, trying to cheer him up. Although he wasn't upset that the child clearly wanted to impress him, it was completely unnecessary. The mere fact that Techno even thought about giving him anything was enough to warm his heart.

"I just got some glitter cones," he reminded. Wilbur cleared his throat significantly. "Which are, of course, very pretty, and I'm absolutely sure your gift is just as... amazing."

Techno glanced at the ex-school project on the table and he must have felt a bit more confident with his own abilities as he approached Phil and, after a second hesitation, dropped the package into his hand.

"But don't laugh," he repeated, stepping back to sit next to Wilbur.

Phil nodded just as seriously.

"I promise."

In fact, he wasn't laughing. He didn't even intend to do so when he turned a bracelet made of thin straps in his hands. In its very center a round pebble, painted dark green, gleamed.

"I saw something like that once, in one house," Techno explained quickly, anticipating the question. "And they said it was precious and I couldn't touch it. But I remembered it recently, and somehow..." He blushed, suddenly flustered. "I don't know. Thought it would fit you or something..."

Phil ran his fingers slowly along the weave. The mere thought that the boy had taken the time to do something nice for him, that he managed to focus on it for quite a while when patience really wasn't his forte...

"Oh, Techno..."

"Awww..." Wilbur shifted so that he could rest his chin on his brother's shoulder. "You made him a friendship bracelet!"

Techno pushed him away, pulling his knees high and resting his forehead against them so that only a pair of furiously red ears could be seen from behind his pink hair.

"Piss off."

"But I want one, too! Do one for me!"

The boy made a low grunt.

"Piss off," he repeated, but reached into his pocket and pulled out another braid.

Wilbur gasped in delight, immediately taking the bracelet away and reaching out to Phil.

"Tie it!" He asked. "We'll be matched!"

Phil almost automatically started tying the little knot, keeping his eyes on Techno, which seemed to sense his gaze as he looked up.

"Thank you." His fingers tightened around his own bracelet. The pebble, heated by the heat of the body, gave a pleasant, strangely familiar weight. "Really. It's very pretty, and you don't even know how glad I am that you thought of me."

He knew he should add something else. He *wanted* to add something else, but 'I love you' died on his lips and he hesitated. Only for a second, but it was enough. He knew that if he said it now, it would sound artificial, as if he was forcing himself to do it, or was just trying to convince himself. He didn't want Techno to hear it that way for the first time. In a hurry and a little under some strange pressure, the source of which he couldn't even find. It should be an important and sincere moment just for them and between them.

So, while he clearly felt he was missing something, he said nothing more, hugging the boy without a word and holding him a little longer than necessary.

"Why is it green?" Wilbur ran his finger over the pebble while Techno tied the bracelet around Phil's wrist.

"I don't know." He shrugged, not honoring his brother with a single glance. He was so focused on the knot that he probably didn't even notice that he was biting the tip of his tongue. Phil had no intention of letting him know. "The one I saw was. But like I said, I couldn't touch them."

He tugged lightly on the string to make sure the knot was tight, and looked up tentatively, as if waiting for an evaluation. Phil grinned as he ruffled his hair.

"If they looked like green diamonds, they were emeralds," he prompted. "Wait."

He reached for the phone to search for a suitable photo. Both boys immediately stood up and moved closer, peering over his shoulders.

"And are they really so valuable?" Techno asked.

Phil tapped a finger on a pebble on his wrist.

"Not as valuable as this one," he said, and the boy instantly blushed and looked away. But he couldn't hide the smile or the sparkle his eyes suddenly acquired. And he didn't even try.

Phil had finished his coffee and made some hot chocolate for himself as well, before the boys finished unwrapping their presents. Mainly because everyone was carefully watched and commented on, changing hands. It was nice to see the consecutive parcels stop dividing into 'yours' and 'mine' and start to become 'ours', even if opinions about them were strongly divided. Techno clearly didn't understand Wilbur's excitement about the new puzzle, but he was the only one who enjoyed the pile of books, so much so that he started reading one of them on the spot and only stopped when his brother threw a ball of paper at him. To be honest, Phil had never expected his older son to be such an avid reader. He even had to take the boy's flashlight after the fourth time he caught him reading under the covers well after midnight.

"I didn't know you liked books so much," he commented the next day, after the whole lecture 'I'm glad you have a hobby, but I'll be even happier if you don't go blind in your thirties.'

Techno shrugged.

"Me neither. I mean..." He hesitated and looked at Phil intently. Not like when he was afraid he would say or do something that get him in trouble. Wilbur looked at him that way sometimes before mentioning his previous home. As if he were considering whether he would get enough support and consolation afterwards that it would be worth recalling all the bad emotions once again. "I knew I liked it. But I never could."

"You didn't have books at home?"

"Sometimes I did. But it was... When I read, I... I pay less attention to everything. And someone could... You know."

Phil knew, unfortunately. And he wished he had been able to prevent it in any way. But he had learned to appreciate even more the moments when Techno would come down with a book to the living room and without a word sit next to him on the couch, his head resting on Phil's shoulder. Nothing made him happier than the thought that his child trusted him and felt completely safe with him.

"Hey, Wilbur. You have one more left."

The boy looked away from the board game they had already unpacked, laid out on the floor, and argued as to whether they needed any instructions. He looked back at the last, largest packet and grinned broadly.

"I left it for the end," he explained, pulling the package closer. "Because it's the biggest."

He started tearing the paper open, but as soon as he exposed half of the box, his hand froze in place. Phil couldn't make out his expression, but he could hear him draw in a loud breath and hold it for a long moment.

"Your teacher mentioned that you like to play." He smiled as he set the mug of chocolate down on the table. There were still some blue glitter leftovers on his fingers. "You never talked about it, but I thought maybe you'd like to practice at home too? I'm very glad that you found yourself a hobby."

The boy still didn't answer, and the silence was slowly becoming disturbing. His shoulders trembled, his breathing quickened into a series of shallow, shaky breaths, and Phil really, really should know by this point that something was going on. Something very, very bad, something that needed his full attention, but for some reason his mind stubbornly rejected the thought. After all, nothing happened, no one did anything, no one shouted, no one got upset, there was no reason to provoke such a reaction.

Techno frowned, leaned in to meet Wilbur's eyes, and instantly paled himself.

"Phil. Phil but he's crying..."

It was only this that made Phil shake off his trance and immediately jumped out of his chair.

"Wilbur, hey, what's-" he began gently, crouching down beside him and putting his hand on the boy's shoulder.

A second too late, he realized he had made a huge mistake. The boy flinched violently, bouncing away from him as if burned. He tried to get up off the floor, but was shaking to the point that he was unable to stand on his own feet and landed on his back. He had a pale face, eyes wide open, his chest was rising and falling far too quickly, and the first tears were already running down his cheeks.

Phil felt his heart and stomach tighten simultaneously.

"Wilbur..." he tried again, completely pointless and out of sheer desperation, and as usually happens in such situations, it only made matters worse.

"No!" It was hard to call it a scream, more a squeal mixed with a sob. Phil withdrew his hand immediately, but the child pulled away from him anyway until he hit the back of his head against the wall and pressed his back against it. Only then did he curl up, hiding his face between his knees and shielding head with arms. "Please, no, no more... I won't do it, I'll never do it again, I promise, really, *never* ...!" He cried, not the 'please help me' way Phil was used to, but out of sheer fear and the absolute certainty that someone was going to hurt him, that something very bad was about to happen. "Never again, but please don't do this, please, please, no!"

Phil made no attempt to approach him again, instead focusing on keeping his own voice calm.

"Wilbur, it's okay, no one is going to hurt you," he assured, seeing out of the corner of his eye as Techno retreated behind the couch. "You're safe. Can you hear me?"

Wilbur didn't hear. He didn't hear or didn't understand, or he just didn't believe.



"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry, I didn't want to and I won't do it anymore and... And I'll be quiet. I promise I'll be quiet!" He cringed tighter, actually trying to hold his breath, which of course had the opposite effect, and then burst into an even louder, spasmodic cry. "I'm sorry, really, please..."

Phil was absolutely sure that in a moment he would start crying himself. Out of grief, helplessness, and fear, because although some logical last part of him knew there was no physical harm going on the boy, it didn't really matter. Mentally, Wilbur was in a completely different place, a terrible place full of people willing to hurt him for any reason. His pain might not be physical, but that didn't mean it wasn't real.

"Shhh... It's okay, breathe slowly, okay?" He tried again, and perhaps it was the familiar words, perhaps the gentle tone, but although the crying didn't stop, Wilbur made no further attempt to say anything. Phil gave him a few seconds to catch his breath. "Hey, Wilbur. Can you hear me?"

It was a long time before the boy nodded. He was trembling so much that the gesture was almost imperceptible, but it was still a big step.

"Can you look at me?: This time, Wilbur shook his head, sharply and violently. "Are you afraid that I'll do something to you?" A short nod. "That I would yell?" The boy curled his shoulders, but the dark mop of hair slowly moved up and down. "I won't, I promise. I'm not angry. I'm worried about you and I want to help you." It took all of his willpower and wits for Phil not to pull the boy to him immediately and shut him up in a firm, secure embrace. But at this point, Wilbur wouldn't have found it either safe or tender at all. He would take it as an attack and only think that... Oh. "You're afraid I'll hit you," he said more than asked, and even before the confirmation was given, he felt that he would have serious trouble swallowing all the pain and anger and absolute hatred of anyone who made his child afraid to even look at him. "I'll never, ever hurt you, okay? Never. You haven't done anything wrong."

The boy sniffled loudly, swallowing back tears.

"I'm sorry..."

"You got nothing to apologize for, Wilbur. Please look at me."

He said nothing more, not wanting to give him a million tasks and commands at once, instead giving him time to focus on one. Minutes passed, then two, three, but finally the boy's breathing slowed down a bit, his arms slowly revealing his head and hugging his tightly pulled knees until Wilbur finally looked up at Phil with a blank, unseeing gaze. His face was red and wet with tears, and his thoughts were clearly still far away, but Phil smiled with relief anyway.

"Great! Thank you. You're doing very well," he praised. "I won't do anything to you. I won't come any closer if you don't let me and I won't try to touch you. I just want to see you're safe, okay? See?" Very slowly, he put his hands on his lap so that the boy could see them all the time. "I won't do anything. And look, I still have blue fingers. You gave me glitter cones, remember? Your teacher let you take them home. She said they are very original. And Techno

made bracelets for us." He nodded at his wrist. "Take a look. You have the same. We're matched."

Wilbur glanced down at his hand, first quickly, glancing immediately back to Phil, then again, with much more thought and a sudden flicker of awareness.

"Techno." He looked around, his breathing quickening again. "Where's Techno?"

It was difficult to judge whether he was more looking for help or afraid that his brother was being hurt. Probably both, more or less equally. The reason didn't really matter. Phil immediately turned to look for the other child crouching behind the back of the couch.

"Techno? Can you...?" He reached out, despite all his desperation trying to let the boy understand that he didn't have to do anything he wasn't comfortable with, but he didn't even finish the sentence before Techno grabbed his hand and stepped closer.

Wilbur's eyes widened at the sight of him, and he immediately reached out, scooping him closer as soon as he came within reach. He hid his face in his sweatshirt, tightening his grip around the waist, spewing out 'please' and 'sorry' again between sobs.

Over his shoulder, Techno looked at Phil helplessly, pleading for any hint.

"Come on..." He patted his brother a little awkwardly on the back. "But don't cry, okay?"

He was definitely not good at comforting. But he didn't have to be either, because Wilbur clung to him tighter and seemed to find more solace in his presence than in any words.

Phil couldn't honestly say that he didn't feel betrayed and rejected in some way. He couldn't even deny that deep down, beneath a thick layer of relief and fear, he felt a twinge of jealousy. He knew he shouldn't, that Wilbur's behavior was fully understandable, that adults had done him the most harm, so the choice between other children and an adult was almost obvious. He could never be angry with him for it. He would never even admit it. But that didn't make all these thoughts and feelings cease to exist.

But that was a different problem between him and his therapist. Now he was just focusing on the fact that Wilbur had finally calmed down a bit, enough to lift his head and look around him, a little more alert than the last time.

Phil smiled at him.

"Hey kid," he said softly, trying not to scare him. "Do you know where you are?"

Wilbur blinked looking around again.

"At home," he replied, but his voice was hesitant, and the way he frowned at the furniture showed that he wasn't exactly right. "I... but I..."

"Shhh, it's okay. You are safe. Can I come closer?"

Wilbur hesitated, glanced at Techno, and when Techno nodded, after a second's thought he repeated the gesture. Phil moved closer, still giving them space and not trying to touch either of them. Wilbur's hands tightened around his brother's sweatshirt.

"I really thought..." He hesitated, took a deep, calming breath and his eyes suddenly focused a little. "You're not angry?" He said, looking at Phil carefully.

"I'm not."

"And you won't hurt me?"

"Never."

Wilbur's lips twitched, there was a hint of understanding in his eyes, and he suddenly cried a second time, this time almost silently, stretching out his hands in a pleading gesture.

"Phil...!"

It wasn't a second before he found himself in a firm embrace.

"I thought you were gone!" He sobbed loudly. "I thought that I was there again and that... again..."

"I'm here." Phil rocked him slightly, letting trembling arms encircle his neck. "I'm here and I won't let anything happen to you. Never again."

It took a good dozen or so minutes for the boy to calm down enough to loosen his grip a bit and pull away, wiping his cheeks with his sleeve. Phil allowed him to do so, keeping his hands on his shoulders, drawing little circles with his thumbs at a steady, calming pace.

"I remembered something, Phil." The kid's voice was low, uncertain and still disturbingly tearful. "I remembered something, and it was so real, and I thought..." He took a deep breath. "Because I saw a guitar and..."

Phil leaned in so he could kiss the top of his head. He noticed Techno, still sitting against the wall, as if waiting for someone to finally let him go, and he reached out, beckoning him.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," he whispered in Wilbur's ear as the other child joined their little cocoon.

The boy sniffed again, resting his cheek on his shoulder.

"It's okay," he assured, although he sounded very far from 'okay.' - "It wasn't real. I mean, it was, but then, not now." He turned his head toward the still half-wrapped guitar box, and immediately flinched as he buried his face in Phil's robe. "Long time ago, not now," he repeated, as if trying to convince himself to do so.

Techno patted him hesitantly on the shoulder.

"I can take it away if you want," he suggested, and he regretted it very much as Wilbur sprang to his feet, panicked again.

"No! No please, no..." He broke off and blinked as if he had just realized what he was doing, then crouched down, squeezing his eyes shut and pressing his hands to his ears. "Phil, please make me forget. Make me forget it, please, Phil, I'll do anything and I'll be good, but please, please..." He swayed on his heels, fingers tightening in his hair. "I don't want to remember this, I don't want to remember, Phil-!"

If Phil had to say what he regretted the most in his life, it would be this moment. He would indicate the pain and regret and the paralyzing helplessness when he was unable to meet his son's requests. When he had to listen to his pleas and look at his tears, knowing that he couldn't do this one thing for him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered and wanted to say something else, wanted to say something that would actually matter and change anything, but his throat was too tight and his head was chaos. "I'm so sorry, Wilbur, but I can't..."

Unable to take his eyes off the boy, he felt more than saw Techno move away from him and sit down next to his brother.

"Hey." He nudged him slightly on the shoulder and Phil was about to forbid him to do so when Wilbur actually raised his head just enough to look at him. "You want... do you want to see a trick?"

Wilbur was perhaps too surprised to react in any other way than just staring at him with wide eyes. Techno apparently took this as a very enthusiastic agreement, as he looked around, reached for the closest piece of paper, and held it under his nose.

"Here. You have to hold something for it to work."

Wilbur sniffed, trying to control his breathing, and dutifully squeezed the paper in his trembling hands.

"And what now?"

"You have to think about how much you hate it."

Phil blinked. Wilbur was so shocked he seemed to be slowly forgetting to cry.

"What?"

"You have to take something and imagine that you hate it very, very much. I don't know. I do and it works." He hugged himself, regretting the initiative a little bit. "I think about everything that happened and why I'm sad and angry and I imagine that it is all the fault of what I hold... And then I destroy it and I feel better."

Phil wasn't sure what he thought about the idea. On the one hand, it was definitely not a hundred percent healthy way of dealing with emotions. On the other hand, he was happy that the boy took advantage of inanimate objects instead of looking for more living material for

his anger. Well, he had no better idea at the moment, and Wilbur looked so curious that after hesitating for a moment, he closed his eyes, pressing the piece of paper tightly against his chest. His face showed many emotions, none of which were positive, but it was only when he inhaled loudly and ripped the paper in two in one motion that real anger appeared in his eyes. He tore the paper open again and again until pieces too small for him to pick up spilled onto the floor. Only then did he breathe, slowly lowering his hands.

Techno leaned in to look at him.

"And?" He asked. "Did it help?"

Wilbur frowned.

"I think so? A bit?" He shook his head. "I don't know."

"But you aren't crying anymore."

The boy seemed to realize it only then.

"Oh," he blurted out as he raised his arm to wipe away any remaining tears. "Right..."

Phil could no longer sit idly by.

"Can I...?" He spread his arms, looking questioningly at the boys, who almost immediately jumped up to snuggle against him as if they hadn't been doing it in ages. "Thank you," He whispered in Techno's ear. "You did great."

They moved to the couch as soon as Wilbur felt he could stand for more than a few seconds. Thanks to this, the guitar was finally out of his sight. Phil tried not to think about what he should do with it next, instead focusing on running his fingers through the boy's hair, time after time. It was getting light outside, the hot chocolate had cooled down a long time ago, but in their small, warm cocoon, time did not matter.

"Phil?" Wilbur shifted uneasily.

"Yhm?"

"Thank you. For the guitar."

Phil's hand froze for a second before resuming its way up and down the kid's back.

"We don't need to talk about it now," he said, but the boy shook his head.

"It's okay. I won't cry anymore."

He put a hand on the boy's cheek, gently turning his face toward him so that he could look him straight in the eye.

"You can cry as much as you want and whenever you want. And no one will be angry with you for that."

It took several seconds, a few loud heartbeats and deeper breaths, before Wilbur slowly nodded his head.

"I know," he said, resting his cheek against Phil's chest again. He found his hand and squeezed it tightly, swallowing loudly. "I was learning to play, you know?" He began softly. "Once. I mean, not at home, but at school. My teacher was always nice and sometimes allowed me to stay after school when I asked. And she gave me books and said that I have talent and that I learn very quickly. I liked to be good at something for once, you know? And I wanted her to be proud of me, so I made a cardboard guitar so that I could practice chords at home too, when nobody was watching. And I mentioned it to her once and she said that if I wanted to, I could take the school guitar home. And I asked my parents, but they disagreed. Because the guitar makes a lot of noise. And I couldn't be loud. And..." He hesitated, his voice suddenly much higher. "Phil, I know I shouldn't have done it and you would probably get angry too, but I wanted it so much, so badly! So I said they agreed and I took the guitar home because I thought no one would be there till late. But they came back earlier and I didn't hear in time and... And they were so terribly, terribly furious. And they were screaming really terrible things and I really thought they were going to kill me and..." He closed his eyes, gripping Phil's hand tighter. "And they smashed the guitar. To pieces. They hit it on the ground, and I couldn't stop looking and now... now I remember it, forever, and I don't want to. And I was crying so much and I couldn't stop so they got even angrier and I just couldn't stop and then I don't remember much, but they had to take me to the hospital." He paused a moment before softly, with obvious regret. "And then Nate came over and said they didn't want me anymore."

Phil knew it was stupid. That it was just a defensive reaction so that everything he had just heard wouldn't overwhelm him and completely break him down. That he's just looking for one to blame. But his first thought was, '*Of course* Nate said that!' and somehow he didn't feel guilty about it at all.

Of course Nate said so. And of course they didn't want him. Of course they smashed the guitar, and of course it must have all happened to his child, because apparently all the powers of the universe insisted on harming Wilbur in almost every way possible. As if the world were to end if this one particular boy was just happy.

He hugged him tighter and was already getting ready to say something, to comment on it, to somehow comfort him, but at the same moment Techno fired:

"What assholes."

The anger in his voice was so sincere, and his whole demeanor beating the urgent need to avenge all the wrongs he had inflicted, that Phil really couldn't scold him for his choice of words.

"Techno..." He just sighed, more on principle.

"Well, am I wrong?"

"No. You're right, but..." He tried to remember any allegation, but finally gave up. "You're right."

The boy nodded, clearly pleased to have him on his side, and decided to test what he could afford.

"If I could, I'd find them and kill them."

"Techno."

"Well, I would!"

Phil sighed heavily, closing his eyes for a moment and tilting his head back against the back of the couch.

"I know you're angry. Me too," he admitted, looking first at one child, then at the other. "I'm damn mad at everyone who has ever hurt you and... And sometimes I'd like to hurt them too. But that wouldn't change anything."

Techno scowled as he crossed his arms and pressed his back against the pillows.

"I would feel better," he grunted.

Phil ruffled his hair to lighten the mood a little.

"I don't doubt it."

He smiled as he saw that although the child was still trying to feign resentment, he immediately moved closer, clinging to his touch. Wilbur, cuddled against his other side, wiped his face with his sleeve, smiling slightly, clearly amused at how seriously Techno is taking his big brother duties. It was nice. Still a bit heavy on the heart, and sad with the specter of the past painfully looming over and over again, but it was nothing that their little, slightly crooked family was unable to deal with. Maybe not right away, maybe not the first, second, or even the tenth time, but in the end - certainly.

Phil closed his eyes as he thought back to his office, where there had been a pile of documents in the desk drawer for weeks that he should probably mention at last. This was not quite what he had imagined for this moment. First of all, in his vision, neither of the boys was shaky or crying. He wanted this moment to be perfect, so that later they could remember it as completely happy and not associate it with anything unpleasant. But the more he thought about it, the more he understood that no perfect moment would ever come. That there will always be a small detail, there will always be something in the way, there will always be an excuse to postpone everything 'for later'.

He had learned a lesson once when he chickened out, waiting for something. He wasn't going to make that mistake a second time.

"Boys?" He straightened up, thereby forcing the children to back off a bit. He had no idea when exactly, but at some point their closeness began to seem more normal to him than not being there. Hell awaited him, when in a few years they started to grow up, wincing at every touch and avoiding tenderness like fire. "I wanted to ask you something."

The children exchanged glances.

"Did Dream tell you something?" Techno frowned, like he had already entered a broken nose on his to-do list.

Phil was about to deny it, but hesitated.

"*Should* Dream tell me something?" He asked, though he didn't expect an honest answer and wasn't surprised when the boys gave each other short, slightly panicked glances again.

"Nooo..." Wilbur shook his head, making the world's most innocent face while Techno blinked as if he didn't understand the question.

"Dream? Who's Dream?"

Under normal circumstances, Phil would at least try to pretend he wanted a thorough account of what trouble they had gotten into this time, but for the moment he didn't want to be distracted by anything. If they did something really stupid, he would find out sooner or later, if not - they would get away with it anyway.

"Are you happy living with me?"

He looked first at one, then the other, but they both seemed too surprised to answer right away.

"I am," Wilbur said finally with a shrug. "Techno is too, but he's too ashamed to admit."

Predictably, the older boy immediately fired up and gave him a murderous glare.

"I'm not ashamed!"

"Yes? So say it!"

Techno's cheeks flushed pink and he looked away, pressing his lips tightly together.

"I'm happy and I like living with you," he muttered after a few seconds of fighting with himself and immediately made a face at his brother. "See?"

Wilbur stuck his tongue out at him.

"Okay, come on now." No matter how much Phil liked to watch their banter, he had a fairly serious conversation to have and he preferred not to get distracted. Although it was very, very difficult, because Wilbur looked at him and, propping his chin up with his hand, asked:

"Are you glad you have us?"

His eyes sparkled and his smile showed that he knew the answer perfectly well and that he just wanted to hear it again. Nobody with any heart could say no to him.

"Very. And I wish I had you forever."



Wilbur beamed, but Techno seemed much less enthusiastic. He clearly sensed that the confession had something to do with it, because he immediately asked:

"But?"

"But foster families shouldn't be something... permanent. You know that, don't you?" They knew. Of course they knew, and they both looked concerned now. "This is supposed to be more of a temporary state. That's why I talked to Nat and initially got the green light. There are still plenty of documents to sign and I think it will take a while, but I wanted to ask your opinion first." He took a deep breath. *Come on, Phil, you can do it. You know the answer, you know that they want it too, they are already your children.* "I'd like to adopt you. Both of you."

For a few long, goddamn long seconds, all he heard was silence. Both boys stared at him wide-eyed, Wilbur opened his mouth but made no sound, while Techno held his breath, hands tightly clasped on his thighs.

Phil was beginning to have a panic attack state when finally his younger child blinked out of a trance.

"Really?" he said in a low, hopeful voice. Phil brushed the fringe from his forehead and, sliding his hand lower, held a moment against the warm, still damp cheek.

"Really."

"Really really?"

"Yhm."

The boy's mouth stretched a wide smile, and his face lit up so much that he could light up the whole room by himself at night.

"That means I can call you 'dad'?"

Phil had promised himself not to cry. He had promised himself to keep the last remnants of pride and no matter what not to give in to emotions.

But fuck a promise.

"I think so," he said, hearing his voice crack and not caring the slightest bit. He leaned in as the boy reached out to him and wrapped his arms around his neck. "I think I would be very happy if you did that."

More than that - he was absolutely convinced of it. He still hadn't heard the other child's opinion, though, and the silence was starting to bother him.

"Techno?" He turned to face him and immediately felt his heart tighten painfully. The boy was crying. His face was frozen in complete shock, but his eyes were wet and tears were streaming down his cheeks, which he didn't even realize. "Hey... Hey Techno, come on..." He rubbed his cheeks hastily, turning his face towards him. It was only this that made the child

draw his breath louder and focus on him. "I'm not doing anything you don't want to do. And I won't make any decisions without your permission, you hear? You can say 'no' and I promise not to be angry. And I won't send you back, I promise, and everything will be exactly like it is now."

He was quite serious. No matter how much it would break his heart, if Techno didn't want it, at all, or at this point, he was going to respect it. He just wanted him happy and safe.

A small hand gripped his forearm.

"But for sure?" The boy not only looked but sounded almost hysterical. "Are you sure you want me?"

Phil rested his hands on his cheeks, looking him in the eye.

"For sure."

"You wouldn't tell me if you didn't know for sure. You're not like... You wouldn't say it if you were not sure, would you?"

"Of course not."

"And you won't change your mind?" He pondered, no closer to calming down. "No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"Even... even if I do something wrong, and you get angry or-"

"Techno." Phil brought his hands to his shoulders, squeezing lightly, and leaned in to bring their foreheads together. "No matter what you do, I won't change my mind. Never."

The child's lips twitched and he began to cry again, but this time his face showed boundless relief.

"And... And I can stay here?" He stammered out, between one sniffle and another. "Forever?"

Phil couldn't help but laugh.

"Actually, I was hoping at some point you would go to college or meet someone nice, or just get fed up with my grumbling and move out." He pulled back a little so he could run his fingers through his pink hair. He should braid it. "But yes. This will always be your home."

This wasn't quite what he had imagined for this moment. But he wouldn't trade it for any other, not even that perfected vision that he had been creating for weeks. A million times more he preferred his crying boys cuddled up on the couch, waiting for him to finish making breakfast.

"Hey, dad?" Wilbur raised his head hesitantly from Techno's shoulder and Phil froze in a half-step.

He swallowed the lump in his throat with difficulty, hearing his own heart beating far too loudly.

"Hm?"

The boy smiled and shook his head.

"No, nothing. I'm just checking if it works."

Phil would have laughed, really, had he not been so close to crying.

One day his children would truly be his undoing. And that fate will be a million times better than he ever dreamed of.

## Chapter End Notes

Just to let you guys know, I plan to make a Discord server but need some more time for that, cause I know shit about Discord, lol.


## Author's note

Okay, so this time - it's kinda a bad news.

I know that there are only two chapters left and it's unfair of me to take a break right now, but I'm really, really tired, physically and mentally, kinda in the middle of some mental breakdown, and I just hate everything I write. And if I'll continue crying to my sister that I hate my own fic, she'll probably kill me, lol.

So, I'm taking a break. 2-3 weeks, not more, just enough for me to stop thinking I'm a useless pice of shit. And then I'll be back, hopefully with a chapters that I won't hate.

I'm really sorry.

Edit: Thank you, guys, you're really amazing 

# Chapter 39

## Chapter Summary

This chapter is jest a little "Phil being a good dad", 'cause the final one is kinda... you know. ✨Emotions.✨

## Chapter Notes

Hi. It's me. I'm not dead! Which is an awful surprise considering that I wrote my own obituary, preemptively in case I did die, but I didn't so suck on that-

Anyway, guys, I'm feeling so much better now, I really needed that break. My motivation is back and I can write without crying, which is a good and welcomed change, lol.

And I want to say "Thank you" to all of you. Your comments was so nice, and they really helped me get better and I just love you all, best readers ever! ❤️

@Katricea worked on this chapter with me and she did a great job!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

If Phil had considered his children to be clingy before - he really underestimated the force he faced. For the next few days he had to literally barricade himself in the bathroom to have a few minutes of peace. In an act of desperation he even endured house arrest, but out of spite both boys unanimously put his company over their friends. Not that he minded being a private pillow or listening that Wilbur wants to become president in the future, and that Techno hates the idea of government as such (though he really wondered when they would finally notice some contradictions in their plans). He would love to spend his days with them, and preferably the rest of his life, but unfortunately he still had to work. And the two gremlins almost glued to its sides didn't make it any easier.

Could he just have asked for a bit of space and time to breathe deeper? Of course. Would he do it while looking in their thirsty for tenderness and full of some vague longing eyes? No, not really. That is why he welcomed the return to school with open arms and downright indecent enthusiasm. A whole house just for him! And he'll be finally able to clean, cook, and chat with coworkers he hates! Indeed, a miracle of freedom.

It came as no surprise to anyone that his children, like the vast majority of people over the age of five, didn't manage to maintain a state of carefree joy for a long time. When Phil picked them up from school a few days after New Year's Eve, he knew immediately

something was wrong. Techno tightened his hands on the belt, resting his forehead against the glass, but he didn't follow the views as usual when he was offended, nor did he prop his cheek with his hand, as when he was just tired and needed a few minutes to regain strength. His eyes were closed, his shoulders tightened, and he looked like he was close to crying. When asked if something had happened, he replied with a sharp, angry grunt, and as soon as the car stopped in the driveway, he immediately jumped out and ran towards the house. Phil found him a few minutes later, curled up in bed, arms around his legs, forehead resting on his knees. He didn't react when Phil sat down next to him. Phil took that as silent consent.

"Something happened at school?" He asked without trying to force the child to look at him. There was no such need, especially since Techno was clearly not ready to speak yet, as he was just nodding his head. "Did you argued with someone?" A denial this time. "Something happened in class?" A short nod. 'Yes'. "Someone was rude to you?" 'No'. "Did you get a bad grade?"

Techno squeezed his hands tighter and the pink hair slowly lifted up and down. Phil breathed inwardly, a little calmer with the thought that his boy hadn't been hurt and the only thing that had suffered was his newfound ambition.

"Did you try?" He asked, and he got a silent confirmation again, this time much more violent and downright desperate. "It's fine then," he assured, reaching for the kid's braid and untangling it. He only ran his fingers through his hair for a moment, feeling the boy loosen a little under his touch, before he began to braid it again. "Sometimes it happens, even if you try very hard and put a lot of work into something."

Techno finally lifted his head to look at him. His cheeks were dry, but his eyes glittered disturbingly.

"But I promised to be better!" He wasn't screaming, but his voice was full of poorly suppressed anger. "I promised you! And it wasn't even hard and I should know it and I don't know why...!" He slid his fingers through his hair, clenching it tightly. "I'm useless."

Phil immediately reached for his hands, carefully pulling them away from his head and letting him grasp his fingers instead.

"Okay, that's not true," he protested, calmly but firmly. "We talked about it, remember? You're damn smart, and I'm so glad you try. And that you want to be really good." He took a deeper breath. "But for a very long time you didn't have good conditions to study. You still have a lot of backlog, and it may take a while to catch up with the rest of the class. It's not your fault. Nobody's mad at you. And you shouldn't be angry with yourself."

He knew he was going to have this conversation sooner or later, and he was really trying to prepare for it. But no matter how many speeches he made, the sight of his children staring at him with boundless trust as if he were the last good man in the world always made his promises seem suddenly empty, the truth too painful and obvious, facts damn unfair.

Techno pressed his lips into a narrow line.

"But *I promised*," he repeated, with a mixture of desperation and disappointment. Phil understood him perfectly. He felt very much the same, knowing that although he had promised to make sure that nothing and no one ever hurt his children, it was just in front of him that he couldn't always keep his word.

He moved closer so he could hold the boy to his side, resting his chin on the top of his head.

"Remember when Wilbur, Schlatt and Quackity played Monopoly and you joined halfway through the game? And you lost because all the good fields had already been taken?"

Techno made a hollow grunt.

"It was unfair," he grunted, and under other circumstances, Phil would have found it quite amusing that he was still so outraged by it, even though it's been a good few weeks.

"It was unfair. They had more time and more options. Just like the others had more time and opportunities to learn. It's just as unfair, but we can't help it and it won't help if you get angry and blame yourself." He kissed the pink hair before pulling away so he could meet the boy's eyes. "You need more time, Techno. You need time to catch up with the others before you even start racing with them."

"But Wilbur-"

"Wilbur had problems at first, too," he interrupted quickly, feeling an unpleasant twinge of conscience. He knew sibling rivalry was perfectly normal, but he couldn't help but think that if he had put more effort into treating boys equally, Techno wouldn't see his brother as an unsurpassed role model. "Not quite the same, but it took a long time to get used to some things. You can talk to him about it if you don't believe me, but I'm sure he'll tell you the same."

In fact, he quietly hoped the boys would talk about it. Not only because Wilbur had a much better understanding of the situation, but also to break that last barrier between them. The one that made Techno ashamed to admit he didn't understand when Phil helped them with their lessons. That when something finally started to work out for him, instead of rejoicing, he seemed irritated by the ease with which it came to his brother. That he sometimes stared at the grading cards on the refrigerator a little too long, took everything too personally, was too insulted about every joke.

"He asked the teacher to clarify the task again. Three times. And Dream started to make stupid jokes." Wilbur reported once when asked why his brother was in such a foul mood that day. "And then Techno didn't ask about anything anymore. And he stopped talking altogether. Even with me. But then I hit Dream on the pitch, so he's not mad at me anymore."

As tempting as it sounded, Phil definitely preferred his sons to learn to deal with their emotions in a way that doesn't involve hitting anyone. Even Dream.

Techno didn't answer right away. He cringed even more and turned his head, resting his cheek on his knees, and Phil immediately felt the familiar uneasiness. It was about more than a stupid grade, more than the school as such, and more than trying to beat Wilbur in a

competition that shouldn't have happened at all. Phil knew his children and knew when they began to feel insecure in his presence. And not that he detracted from his own ability to completely fail at parenting, but for the vast majority, nine out of ten, the blame lay somewhere in the past, on someone else's shoulders. Which he would gladly break. But later, in his spare time, when he doesn't have a child who needs attention, consolation, and perhaps a packet of handkerchiefs, too, judging by a loud snuffle.

When the boy finally turned to face him, his eyes were wet and he tried to stealthily wipe them with his sleeve. Phil stopped him in mid-gesture, taking his face in his hands and wiping his cheeks himself. It was enough for the child to lose the last of his strength and give up the struggle with his feelings.

"I just don't want you to be ashamed of me," he said softly, his voice vibrating with rising emotions. "And regret taking me."

The therapist advised him to take three deep breaths in such situations, count to ten, and only then look at the matter again, calmly and without emotions. It sounded like a very useful solution, but unfortunately, for the moment Phil forgot that he should breathe at all, and all he could hear was a constant scream, so the task was a bit difficult.

Another piece of advice he heard during therapy was to avoid automatically blaming himself for absolutely everything. He shouldn't ask "What did I do wrong?" but "Did I do something wrong?" and be guided by more than the belief that if his child suffered it was his mistake and a failure as a father. Phil, being a good patient, really did his best to follow these guidelines. But the answer to the first question was always 'yes,' and he moved smoothly into the remorse phase anyway.

"I'm never ashamed of you," he said immediately, as soon as he recovered his voice. "Even if you say stupid things sometimes. Or you act like you've never been to the store before and were raised by monkeys in the zoo," he joked to lighten the mood a bit, and the boy actually smiled. Pale and only for a second, but that was definitely a good sign. "Techno?" He waited for her to meet his eyes. "I'm glad that you want to impress me. But you don't owe me anything, you know? You're just a child. No matter what your grades are or how you act sometimes, you deserve to have a normal home. I'm sorry you didn't get it earlier."

Techno watched him closely for a second, two, three, clearly looking for something. Whatever it was, he finally found it, because his shoulders relaxed, he took a deep, calming breath and suddenly smacked his nose on Phil's shirt, wrapping arms around his waist.

"It's not fair," he muttered, rocked him gently in an equally tight embrace. "But it won't help if you get angry."

It's hard to say which of them liked this fact less. Phil was definitely better at pretending he could put up with it, though.

"It won't," he admitted, sighing heavily. "Unless I yell at Nate again. It could make me better."

Techno looked down at him, eyebrows raised.



"You yelled at him?"

"Only once and only a little. Let me tell you a secret: I don't like him very much."

The boy smirked.

"Neither do I." He replied, also lowering his voice to a whisper.

When ten minutes later Phil was leaving him alone to calm down a bit, Wilbur immediately leaned out the door of his room.

"Is he okay?" he made sure. "He was sad. It's not my fault, is it?"

Phil shook his head as he crouched down in front of him.

"Of course not. He was just having a rough day. I think he might want to talk to you about it afterwards, but don't force him, okay?" He knew the answer in advance, but was relieved anyway when the boy quickly nodded, still glancing toward his brother's room, though now with curiosity rather than anxiety. "Hey, Wilbur? You know I'm very proud of you both, right?"

The boy blinked in surprise, but then a wide smile appeared on his face. One of those meaning that he has an exceptionally good mood and wants to spoil it for someone else.

"I know," he nodded innocently, rocking on his heels. "I'm proud of myself too."

At times, Phil really didn't believe that someone hadn't changed his baby somewhere in the first few weeks. The mischievous little gremlin he loved more than a lifetime was nothing like the silent child who slid around the house, fearing his own shadow. If Phil hadn't seen him gradually adjusting to the new life and gaining confidence with his own eyes, he would have started to study myths quite seriously, with an emphasis on the child-altering fairies. But he was a witness of every stage, especially the intermediate ones, when probably none of them had a clear idea of what he was doing and whether he was doing it well at all.

Like when Wilbur first brought a worse grade from school. It was the third month since he had first entered the house and he had stopped tiptoeing, flinching at every murmur, but when he handed Phil the card he seemed as scared as he was on the first day. It wasn't even a bad grade. Not the highest, a fact, but still one of those Phil could only dream of as a child. But apparently Wilbur had higher ambitions, for he looked as if his whole world was hanging over a precipice.

"Are you angry?" He asked quietly, nervously rubbing one foot against the other and almost jumping back as Phil looked up from the page. "I'm sorry! I know it could have been better, but it was hard and I forgot and so much was going on that I couldn't focus and...!"

He immediately fell silent and held his breath as Phil put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, come on, take it easy. I'm not angry," he assured him, slowly tracing little circles with his thumb, hoping that a gentle touch would calm the kid down a bit. "It's still a very high grade and you should be proud of yourself. Especially since you've had a lot of stress lately,

haven't you?" He waited a moment until the boy nodded. He still seemed unsure, though, and clearly expected some kind of trickery, so after a tense silence, Phil added, "I'm proud of you."

It wasn't just a gesture to cheer him up - his boy really impressed him almost every day, and at least a small part of that sincerity must have been evident in his expression, for Wilbur looked up at him once more, then relaxed his shoulders.

"You're not angry," he repeated, more to himself this time. And immediately he nodded, also probably only to strengthen his conviction. "So you won't hit me."

Phil had a long list of people he would love to hit at times like this. He couldn't imagine Wilbur's name being even close to it.

"No. Never."

Another nod.

"And I can still eat dinner."

"Exactly."

"I could even if you were angry."

"Yhm."

"But you're not."

"I'm not."

Wilbur frowned, thinking intensely. Phil could almost hear the sounds of a total rebuilding taking place in his worldview.

"Okay." He nodded once more, his face lit up with a slight, still shy smile. "I see."

Still, he didn't seem to understand, because even though he was turning the food all over his plate, he was clearly unable to swallow anything. He lifted the fork to his mouth, lowered it, lifted it again, and as a result, the cutlet and potatoes formed a homogeneous mess, from which not a gram made it to the stomach.

"I can't," he finally admitted, setting his fork down, but still gripping his fingers so tightly as if he was ready to hurt someone at any moment. Probably himself.

Phil placed his hand carefully on his smaller and quivering hand, patiently waiting for him to loosen his grip a little.

"Hey, that's okay," he assured him, smiling slightly to cheer him up, but the boy just looked away. "You're not hungry?" He knew the answer in advance, but he wouldn't be himself if he hadn't been under the illusion for a second that at least once the problem might turn out to be simple and utterly trivial. "You don't like it?"

The child's chin trembled and his eyes grew misty. So much for hope...

"'Cause I..." He gasped, hastily wiping his eyes with his sleeve. Phil wondered for a second if he was just ashamed to cry, or if he had been punished for it, too, but he quickly chased the thought away. He didn't like how probably damn the worse option sounded. "I know you said you weren't angry. I know that," he repeated with emphasis and an anger, the lion's share of which he no doubt directed at himself. "But I can't stop thinking about it and... And I feel bad. Like I'm doing something wrong. Because I didn't deserve it."

Sometimes, on those nights when he was especially plagued by feelings of injustice and anger at the world, he wondered if anyone would eventually notice anything disturbing if Wilbur had stayed with his previous family. At what point would anyone pay enough attention to the boy to understand how horribly his thoughts about himself had been shaped, how unattainable standards were constantly imposed on him, how absurd requirements he had to fulfill to earn the right to meet basic human needs? At what point would someone eventually realize that something was wrong? When he would have finally been starved to death? When a frightened child would grow up to be an equally nervous teenager and eventually hurt himself?

Phil hated to think about it. He hated to think what kind of man Wilbur would have turned out to be if, for his own good luck, he hadn't been sent back in time.

The only things worse were the nights when, staring at the ceiling, he wondered if he was a good enough father himself to prevent those things from happening.

But even if he failed at times, even if he made a lot of mistakes, no one could say he wasn't trying. And he was going to keep trying.

He got up from the table, circled it, and crouched down next to the boy's chair.

"You didn't have to 'deserve' the food, Wilbur," he said out calmly, trying to sound more confident than he really was. "Just like you don't have to deserve air or water."

The child tucked his shoulders tighter, shaking his head quickly.

"I know. You said it already. Sorry that I still-"

"No, it's okay," he interrupted quickly, because the last thing he needed at the moment was an apology for speaking, breathing, and being in general. He had a strong suspicion that his heart might not be able to bear it. "I will repeat as many times as necessary. And you can always ask. Maybe..." He nodded towards the still full plate. "Maybe we'll leave it for a while and watch a movie? And I'll warm it up when you get better. Do you think that would help?"

It helped. They spent a good half an hour on the couch watching cartoons together, but eventually Wilbur actually relaxed and felt confident enough to get back to the table. This time he emptied his plate in record time and grinned as Phil ruffled his hair.

That same evening, he went down to the living room to ask for help with lessons for the first time. In math. Which was to some extent the essence of Phil's profession and haunted him every time he turned on the computer. Which, of course, meant that he had long since forgotten the basics and had serious problems with his primary school assignments. But apparently only he saw any problem with it.

"You're good," Wilbur said, covering his mouth to hide a yawn. He was clearly tired, but still insisted on finishing his homework.

Phil glanced over the phone at him.

"I'm literally looking for a solution on the internet."

The boy chuckled.

"Not in math. Generally." He propped his cheek with his hand, yawning again, and this time he didn't even hide it. "And you're not yelling when I can't do something. You really want to help. It's nice."

Phil put the phone back on the desk, studying his boy in silence for a few seconds. His bloody tired, seated boy who insisted on looking for more x's."

"You don't have to always be the best, you know?" Judging by his expression, he didn't know. Probably he had never even thought of such a possibility. "You don't even have to be good at everything. I can see how hard you are trying and..." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "Don't get me wrong: it's good that you're ambitious. Very good. Quite great. But I don't want you to take on too much." He tapped the notebook with a finger, and Wilbur, staring at it wide-eyed, glanced quickly at the paper. "You're very bright and have a great memory, so learning is easy so far. But it gets harder over time, and if you try to be good at everything, you can burn out quickly."

Wilbur frowned.

"But I like to learn. And I like to have good grades," he assured, and while it still sounded a bit like a learned, safe formula, Phil knew him well enough to know there was a lot of truth to it, too.

Whatever the case, Wilbur was indeed very curious about the world and absorbed knowledge in all amounts and in all forms. On Saturdays, after checking five times that he could turn on the TV, he would watch one nature documentary after another, and regardless of the subject matter, he always seemed equally fascinated.

And maybe that was the problem. Perhaps that was what Phil was most afraid of. That someday, in a few, maybe a dozen or so years, his boy would lose this fascination, this sincere, innocent need to simply discover something new.

"I know, kiddo," he sighed. "But sometimes... Sometimes, even if we like something very much, it can hurt us to take too much. When we go out for ice cream, you choose the flavors you like best, right? You're not trying to eat everything you can, or you could get sick. I'm not

telling you to stop learning, or that it's wrong to demand a lot from yourself. But with time, there will be more and more of everything. There will be more and more flavors to choose from and the portions will get bigger and you will have to decide which one you like best."

Wilbur shifted uneasily.

"I don't understand..." he admitted, glancing at him anxiously. Phil really had a bloody hope that someday his son would stop looking at him that way. That someone of the day will feel confident and at ease enough to be loud and cranky and sometimes obnoxious, like any happy child.

"You like geography." The boy nodded. "And you don't like math." He wrinkled his nose, but nodded again. "So if you have a difficult geography test and then a math test, it's okay if you get a better grade on the first than on the second. It's perfectly normal if you focus on what really interests you. School is important. But it's just as important that you have time to breathe or play with your friends."

Perhaps if the boy had been a little more awake at that moment, and had laid a little less fatigue on the desk, he would have protested more. Fortunately, he had just enough energy to slowly nod his head.

"And you won't be angry?"

"I won't be angry." He closed his notebook, nodding toward the bed. "Go to bed now, okay?"

That night, he came more often than usual to check that Wilbur was sure he was asleep, safe and sound. He wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for and what danger he was expecting, but the sight of the child, calm and as if not tormented once by any nightmares, calmed him and finally let him fall asleep.

## Chapter End Notes

One chapter left! As you can see, I changed tags (sorry they were confusing before, I really didn't plan to split this fic and then I totally forgot about it). So Tommy's out of here, and I wanted you to know for sure, that the ending will be good ;)

Also, I'll post first chapter of the next part of the series probably a few days after this one ends, so don't worry.

ALSO, I still thinking about making Discord server, but since it takes me forever, if you guys want to talk to me outside ao3, I'm @bially-lis on Tumblr 😊

# Chapter 40

## Chapter Notes

136k words! Christ, it was supposed to be short story! But, oh, well, I guess... But, that's it. Everything must come to an end. The drip finally stops.

...

Naaah! I'm not done with this shit, there's so much more and I'll be throwing this at you guys till you have enough. I'm gonna start next part of this series in next week, probably saturday or sunday, sooo... be ready ;)

@Katricia beted this chapter! Pog!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Somehow, even though Phil had reached a level of nervousness himself at which driving was no longer a good idea, his children were five times as stressed to be visiting the adoption facility.

Okay, one child. Wilbur, being himself, put on headphones before they even left the driveway and just hummed under his breath, occasionally singing single lines of the song. Techno looked at him every time as if he was ready to murder him and was only held back by the fact that his whole body was too tense to move even a finger.

"What should I tell them?" He asked at one point in a choked, slightly trembling voice. Phil glanced at him in the rearview mirror, having difficulty swallowing himself. The only thing between them and utter insanity was Wilbur, who got into Thomas Jefferson's rap way too much.

"The truth."

Techno grimaced.

"But what do I say to stay with you? Like, for sure", he pointed out, and while the question itself had many disturbing aspects (and the fact that the boy was willing to lie for him wasn't the worst of them at all), it somehow made Phil feel a little better.

"Still the truth," he repeated, and only in his mind, very, very softly, added 'I hope so.'

It was stupid. He was nervous for no reason at all. Nate had promised to take care of everything and ensured that the rest of the procedure would go smoothly, but Phil couldn't be as confident. Could they even stay with him? If social services decide that he wasn't fit to be a father, would they take both of his boys from him on the spot? Just the thought that there was a chance, small but still a chance, that something would go wrong, the thought that he would have to look his kids in the eye and admit that he had screwed up...

He pulled over to the gas station, just to have an excuse to lock himself in the bathroom and splash cold water on his face.

Somehow, however, he managed to get them to place and at no point landed in the ditch or turned the car around in a fit of panic. Nate greeted them just outside the door, on the threshold of a long, wide hall, where the silence seemed a little too loud and the sounds echoed slightly. Phil didn't like it at all. The walls could be colorful, children's drawings could be hung in large display cases, but the whole thing still had something depressing about it.

Nate shook his hand (just a little sweaty from the nerves) and immediately turned all his attention to the younger child.

"Wilbur!" He smiled broadly. "Hey, look at you! You're so tall now! I missed you, you know?"

The boy beamed like a little sun in the middle of a very dark night.

"And I didn't miss you at all!"

Phil couldn't explain why, but he felt better immediately. Perhaps he had finally felt the calmness of the child, perhaps he had somehow taken over from him some of the absolute certainty that everything would be fine and exactly as it should be. Or maybe just because Nate's expression was totally worth coming here.

"Wilbur..." he sighed anyway, at least to keep up appearances.

Nate just smiled, a little less sincere than before.

"It's okay, really," he assured, but it was obvious that he was starting to look at the boy a little differently. More in terms of a search to see if there is really anything left of that quiet, reticent child from months ago. Then he probably decided that it couldn't be worse, because he masochistically asked: "I guess Techno didn't miss me either?"

The boy's face was completely expressionless.

"None of us like you," he muttered indifferently, and this time Phil felt a little more compelled to intervene.

"Techno!"

"What? You said so yourself!"

Damn it. This is the price of a moment of honesty...

"No, not at all. You got something wrong."

Techno looked at him as if he really wanted to rebuke him for this betrayal, but ultimately took pity and showed mercy. Or maybe he was just too stressed for it.

Nate briefly explained the whole procedure: each of the boys was to have a separate interview with a psychologist, which was supposed to be a mere formality and they shouldn't worry about it at all. Phil knew it was meant to calm him down, but in fact it had just the opposite. They talked about the future of his children. Checking their safety and comfort shouldn't be a 'formality'. Not that he'd been asking for regular inspection raids or wanted to delay the case even further, but he had to bite his tongue hard, to not say that maybe if Social Services had examined each case a little more closely, he would have been less likely to be woken up by screaming and crying in the middle of the night.

Wilbur still didn't seem the least bit worried. He seemed to think the whole topic was closed the moment he heard about the adoption for the first time - Phil said he wanted them to stay forever, so that's what they would do. Easy. On the one hand, his confidence and belief in the unquestionable authority of his guardian were lovely, on the other, Phil wouldn't be himself if he hadn't already been worried that one day he would disappoint him very seriously.

Techno, by contrast, was stressing more and more with each passing second, stepping nervously from foot to foot and clutching Phil's hand tightly as if his life depended on it. Nor did it reassure him that Phil was the only one who hadn't moved when Nate showed them the way to the office. Techno looked at him, at their still clasped hands, back at him and frowned.

"Phil can't come with us?"

Nate looked a bit surprised, but still smiled reassuringly.

"I'm afraid not."

Techno hasn't thought to accept that as an answer.

"Why?"

While Phil would love to see Nate handle the situation, the moment of satisfaction was definitely not worth the extra stress on his kid. So instead, he crouched down in front of the boy, with his free hand brushing a loose strand of hair behind his ear.

"It's only for your safety," he explained patiently. He had already explained it to them at home, at least a few times in the past weeks, so that they had time to get used to it, but he didn't mind repeating it again. "To make sure that you're honest and that no one is forcing you to say anything."

Techno pursed his lips into a narrow line, giving Nate a quick glance.

"I don't trust them," he lowered his voice a little, and though he was clearly trying to sound serious and rational, a shadow of fear flashed across his face.

Phil looked down at his fingers, still locked in a tight grip, and had to take a few seconds to remember that no, he couldn't grab both boys, run out of the building, and barricade them into a safe house.



"I know. But I promise you'll be alright." He covered the boy's hand with his, patiently waiting for it to stop trembling at his touch, and until his fingers slowly loosened their grip. Even then, however, he didn't withdraw his hand. "I'll be here the whole time."

Techno took a deeper breath.

"Will you be waiting?", he made sure yet again.

"I won't move a step."

Techno turned several times as he walked down the corridor, before stopping in front of the right door and hesitatingly reaching for the doorknob. Wilbur, entering the next room, waved at him, smiling broadly, and that was probably what finally gave him courage.

As soon as they were alone in the corridor, Nate looked at Phil with open curiosity.

"How did you do that?"

The question wasn't wrong in itself, and Phil knew that there were no evil intentions behind it. After all, his son was actually not usually very kind to other people, and there was no point in denying it. But he still didn't like the note of admiration in the man's voice, as if it were some great achievement. As if he had tamed a dangerous beast and not convinced a little boy that he could feel really safe for the first time in a long time.

"I wasn't a dick" he said, wincing slightly. "Seriously. It was enough to impress them. The bar was practically underground."

Almost an hour passed before Wilbur reappeared in the corridor and immediately ran to Phil, holding out a color-smudged piece of paper towards him.

"What's that?" Taught by experience, he didn't try to guess himself.

"Tornado."

"Oh. Is that a horse?"

"A mule. He escaped from the basement."

"Oh." Oh, indeed... "I understand."

Wilbur beamed at him.

"I told them so! That you would understand!"

Techno left the office a few minutes later, much less happy than his brother and clearly tired.

"Can we go back now?" He asked, falling almost limp into Phil's wide-open arms. "Please..."

He must have been really tired - maybe from waking up early, maybe all the stress, or maybe he just didn't sleep very well that night, worrying too much about the day ahead - because he

fell asleep almost as soon as the car started and was still asleep when they arrived at home. Phil glanced at him in the rearview mirror and, after a second's thought, backed out of the drive and back onto the road.

"I'll drive around for a while," he explained when Wilbur looked at him questioningly. "Let him rest."

The boy smiled, put on the headphones and, leaning his temple against the glass, also closed his eyes. Phil drove the city for another hour, aimlessly, and already with two children asleep in the backseat.

He wasn't going to complain.

\* \* \*

At first, Phil didn't know what woke him up. He barely made himself look up at all and listen, but the house seemed to be in complete silence, and when he switched on the lamp, squinting at its glare, neither of the boys stood on the threshold of the room demanding attention and a place in the bed. It was almost four in the morning, completely dark outside, the snow was settling on the windowsill in thick drifts, and there was no good reason to fight the sleepiness. However, he barely had time to reassure himself in this belief when he heard the creak of the door, and then the sound of bare feet on the floor. He sat up, getting ready to receive the unannounced visitor, but the footsteps moved away, and then he heard the bathroom door open.

Ah, okay. Alarm canceled, crisis averted, back to sleep. Great.

Yet something was still bothering him. Perhaps it was a hunch, perhaps an experienced distrust of anything that sounded too easy, but with each passing minute, it made him more and more concerned that no one was sneaking back down the hall and back to the room.

He was absolutely sure he would not be able to sleep. Not until he has personally made sure everything is fine. Even if his whole body protested against leaving the bed, and the contact of his bare feet with the floor was not the most pleasant.

It took exactly five seconds to realize that he was right. The bathroom door was ajar, soft, jerky sobs breaking through the rush of the water again and again. If Phil had been any more conscious, he would have probably acted differently. He would probably try to at least stick to his own rules and give the child a minimum of privacy, or at least knock and wait for any response. But it was the middle of the night, he could barely keep his eyes open, and one of his sons clearly needed help, so without a second's thought he pushed the door open as he stepped inside.

Techno was standing next to a half-filled tub, sleeves rolled up high and arms up to the elbow in the water. Phil looked at him, at his red, teary face, at the sheet he was trying to push

deeper into the water with a desperate gesture, at pants that were definitely different than the T-shirt... Oh.

"Oh, Techno." He hurriedly turned off the water and, grasping the boy by the elbow, carefully pulled him away from the tub. "Leave it, you don't have to... I'll just put the laundry in, okay?" He reached for a towel, crouched down and, turning the kid towards him, began to wipe his hands. He made no attempt to make eye contact, focusing instead on keeping his touch soft and his voice as gentle as possible. "Nothing happened. Don't worry about it."

Techno didn't say a word. Instead, he leaned forward, hugging his neck tightly, his shoulders trembling in silent sobbing.

Phil rocked him gently, stroking his back.

"Come on, come on," he muttered soothingly. "You could come to me right away." Techno just clung tighter to his shirt, shaking his head. "Were you scared?" Another denial. "Ashamed?" A short nod. "Oh, kiddo... Completely unnecessary. These things happen sometimes."

Techno was clearly of a different opinion.

"I'm not a baby," he grunted, but the tearful tone made it sound really damned childish. Not that it mattered.

"Of course not. But that doesn't mean you have to be ashamed. You had a bad dream?"

"Yhm."

"Very bad?"

Shaking arms gripped him a little tighter.

"Very."

Phil stroked his hair, letting him hide his face in his shoulder. Even if he really had no reason to be ashamed, forcing him to pretend anything would only make it worse. So Phil just let him cry.

"I'm gonna pick you up, okay?" He asked after a long moment as the sobs turned into a series of sniffles.

Techno nodded, wrapping his legs around his waist as soon as he was lifted off the ground .

"Don't tell Wilbur," he asked softly as they walked down the dark corridor.

"Not a word. But you know he wouldn't make fun of you."

He would personally make sure of it.

"Mhm." Techno rested his cheek on his shoulder. "I know. But don't tell him."

Phil had put him down on the ground outside the bedroom door. In the dim light of the bedside lamp, he could finally get a little better look at him, and immediately felt his heart tighten painfully in the sight.

"I'll go and change your sheets, but you can sleep with me if you want," he offered, wiping his hands over wet cheeks, and smiled fondly as the boy tilted his head, clinging to the touch. He took this as consent. "Lie down, I'll be back in a minute."

In fact, it took a little longer for him to change the sheets and adjust the washing machine than he expected. Though he tried to get through it as fast as possible, he felt guilty when he finally closed the bedroom door behind him and, in a cocoon of quilts and pillows, spotted the child curled up in a tight ball.

"Hey," he whispered, settling down next to him. "You're not sleeping yet?"

As a response, he was immediately pulled into a firm hug, which he returned without hesitation.

"I'm sorry." The boy's voice was still trembling and high-pitched. "I didn't do it on purpose, I promise."

"Come on, it's fine now." Phil shifted so that he could kiss the top of his head. "Nothing happened. Do you want to tell what your dream was about? Maybe you'll feel better."

It was obviously a goddamn naive assumption, because he immediately felt the boy tense and his breathing quicken.

"It was just a dream, wasn't it?" He asked, sounding as if he needed confirmation at the same time and was still ready for a dismissal. "You haven't changed your mind? You still want me?"

The more Phil thought about it, the more he felt he should have expected it. He should have foreseen that of the two boys, it was Techno who would have a hard time believing him. Wilbur had time to get used to all the changes, to feel at ease and accept the new reality. He had time to understand that Phil loves him more than life itself, and would never let anyone take him away. Techno wasn't used to stability, to being part of the family. The whole situation was still strange and incomprehensible to him, it was no wonder he still expected to lose everything at any moment.

Phil was ready to patiently, day by day, slowly convince him that there was nothing to be afraid of. Starting now.

"It was just a bad dream." He rested his chin on pink hair. "A very, very bad dream."

He tried to put all his confidence into the words and leave no room for any doubts, but he clearly underestimated the forces he faced, because the boy's breathing only sped up.

"You said you changed your mind," he whimpered, starting to tremble again. "And that I'm no longer needed. And... And I asked what I did wrong, but all you said was that you don't

want me anymore and that you have to send me back and that I will never see you and Wilbur again, and-"

"Shhhh ..." Phil hugged him a little tighter, partly wanting to calm him down, partly - calm himself. "I would never, ever do that."

The boy sniffed loudly.

"You promise?" He made sure. "For real?"

Phil brushed his hair out of his face, looking deep into his eyes. Sometimes he wondered how and when that ball of fear and anger he had brought home turned into his son. In his clever, kind child, who might have had sharp tongue and might need more attention and patience at times, but who fully deserved every second devoted to him. He couldn't pick one particular moment, as he couldn't in Wilbur's case. Probably no moment ever happened. They probably just met somewhere halfway, equally surprised by it. Ultimately, feelings seldom came out of the blue, in a full set and ready to go.

But if his child needed just that, if he needed an important moment, a little sublime tone - Phil was going to give it to him.

"I promise. You stay here with us. For ever. No matter what."

Before he met Techno, Phil had no idea how meaningful silence could be. How much can be read from the body language itself, from the even breathing, and from the hands, the grip of which was slowly losing from desperation and turned into an ordinary, innocent need. From how Techno tilted his head back so that Phil could comb his hair, as he closed his eyes, allowing himself to forget for a moment everything that was going on in his head.

But when Phil ran fingers over his arm, he flinched suddenly, opening his eyes immediately.

"Oh. Don't you like when I do that?"

Techno shifted uneasily, simultaneously trying to get his arms out of his reach and hide his face in his shirt. He failed, but Phil himself hastily removed his hands.

"Sorry, I won't do that any more."

The boy shook his head.

"No, it's okay." It definitely neither sounded nor looked "okay"... "It's just... They don't disgust you?"

Phil really believed there was a limit. Some invisible wall marking the moment when such words will no longer hurt him more than if they were about himself. That one time he would finally come to terms with how his children were once hurt and be able to approach it calmly, in a completely logical way.

Lying next to Techno and trying to fight the urge to hug him and pull him as close as possible, he finally realized that such a moment would never come.

Maybe it was a sign that he was too emotional and unfit to be a foster parent. Or maybe a sign that he was a good father for the two kids, who, by a twist of fate, came under his protection. He didn't really care. He cared about his son and his fears and to find a way to overcome them.

"Techno, listen." He leaned over the child, lowering his voice. "People can be cruel. And sometimes they don't think before they say something. But I want you to remember that no one in this house will ever look at you that way." The boy made a soft noise, something between a grunt and a screech, and it was hard to judge if it was more a sign of agreement or denial. Phil sincerely counted on the former. "I know... I know what it's like not to like your scars. Because they remind you of something you'd rather forget and sometimes you just can't look at them because it's too painful. It's okay if you don't like your scars. It's okay if you don't want others to see them, and it's more than okay if someday when you get a little older you decide you want to get rid of them. But it's still your body, Techno, and you should have more respect for it. You cannot punish yourself for what others have done to you."

Techno pressed his forehead harder against his chest, but his arms, though trembling in silent crying, fell slightly looser along his body, and Phil dared to take the risk, placing his hand carefully in his fingers. He tried to think of something more, some better words that might actually help, but he knew perfectly well that even if he recited the entire dictionary, three times and backwards, he would find no magic spell. No cure for all evil, no way to instantly heal wounds.

"They always said I was disgusting," he heard suddenly, the words soft and almost indifferent. "That I deserved it and that it was my fault and..." He clenched his fists tightly. "I really hate them, Phil. I hate to remember that."

His tone remained dry, without any emotion, as if he had long since run out of anger, regret, or even plain sadness. As if he was already too tired of the constant fight and just accepted his own hurt in the worst possible way, passively accepting everything that happened to him.

Phil was far from being accepting. Even further from coming to terms with anything. But his child didn't need his anger right now, didn't need to know that if he could, he would kill anyone who ever looked at him even crookedly. His child wanted him to be with him. Wanted to know that he would love him no matter what happened to him.

"I know, kiddo," he sighed heavily. "I wish I could make you forget about it."

He felt more than saw the first tears streaming down the boy's face.

"I asked them to stop. I was screaming and crying and begging them not to do it, but they... and no matter what I did, they still..."

Phil rocked him gently.

"Shhh... It's okay. I'm here," he whispered through a lump in his throat and, unable to bear the whispers of his conscience any longer, added, "I'm sorry I wasn't there then."

Techno just shook his head.

"I'm glad you weren't," he said, and somehow that sounded a hundred times worse than all the voices in Phil's head put together. "I wouldn't want you to see it. I was pathetic. I couldn't- I couldn't do anything and I let them- " His voice broke, and for the first time in a long moment a hint of emotion shone through him. "I let them do it."

Most likely Phil should have expected this. He could probably have foreseen it, he had probably gotten a million signs beforehand that should have worried him, he was a witness of behavior that should have given him food for thought. But he ignored them all, one by one, because from the start he assumed Techno was stronger. Stronger than Wilbur, stronger than most kids his age.

Because Techno has always tried to defend himself. Because he was always ready to fight. Because he seemed to understand that someone had hurt him, that what happened to him was bad and cruel and should never have happened. Because Techno himself seemed absolutely convinced of his strength and independence.

It never occurred to Phil what the consequences might be.

He tried to pull away so he could look at the boy, but he clung to him even tighter, putting his arms around him with the same desperation with which he had been running away from him a few months ago. Back then, he resembled a small, scared animal, and, in a way, that hadn't changed. He was small, he was scared, and he just wanted to feel safe in the end. So Phil made no attempt to fight him, running his fingers through his long hair and rocking him gently.

"You didn't allow anything, Techno," he whispered. "And you weren't 'pathetic.' You were just a child. You had no way to defend yourself. You shouldn't have to defend yourself at all. It's not your fault someone hurt you, and it's not your fault you couldn't stop him. Look at me," he asked, and maybe it was his gentle tone, maybe his touch, or maybe the fact that it was him speaking, but the boy slowly raised his head. "Do you remember how angry you were with Wilbur's previous family? You think he deserved what happened to him?"

Techno sucked in a sharp breath.

"No!"

"You think it's his fault he didn't know how to defend himself?"

"No!" He repeated louder, clutching Phil's shirt. "Don't say that! Wilbur... Because he's... Wilbur is good. He didn't deserve it, he-" His chin trembled, tears welled up in his eyes again, and it was evident that somewhere deep, somewhere where he was afraid to look himself, something was starting to break in him. "He never did anything wrong. Wilbur's good."

This. That's it. Phil could almost physically feel the rough bricks of the wall he had finally reached under his fingers. The wall that Techno has been building piece by piece for years to protect against his own emotions. Against fear and helplessness and the painful realization that he has no influence on his own life, that no matter how much screaming, biting or scratching, he will never really be able to win anything.

Because believing that he had allowed himself to be hurt was safer than the thought that he had no influence on who would hurt him again and when.

Phil wasn't going to let him think that way any longer. If he had to take the fucking wall apart with his bare hands, brick by brick, he planned to get to the other side, no matter what the cost, no matter how long it took.

"You are too, Techno. You are a good kid. You've met really bad people. They hurt you in many different ways. And none of that has ever been your fault. None of what they told you was true. You're not stupid and you're not weak, and you're definitely not, nor have you ever been, pathetic." He took the baby's tearful face in both hands, bending down to bring his forehead to his. "You're brave and honest and so damned smart that sometimes it surprises me. And there's absolutely nothing 'disgusting' about you."

He knew he couldn't expect too much of himself, much less of Techno. That he would have to put in a lot of time and effort to make the boy really believe him, learn to look at himself more favorably, and finally start liking himself. Contrary to appearances, no answer was a good sign. Because Techno didn't deny or try to argue with him, because he allowed himself to be comforted and he really *wanted* to believe.

"You really care," he whispered suddenly, after a long silence. He looked up, and though his eyes were red and his cheeks still wet, he smiled weakly. "You couldn't pretend that long... could you?"

Phil was sure he was going to start crying himself at any moment. And he didn't even try to fight it.

"Of course I care. You're my son. I love you more than you can imagine."

Thus, with these words, he made the wall tremble for the first time.

Techno cried a long time that night. It was just beginning to dawn before Phil was sure he was finally asleep, but even then he continued stroking his back in a slow, calming rhythm. Wherever the boy was in his mind now, he definitely needed that little bit of support. Everyone needed it, so when Wilbur burst into the room a few hours later, afraid they'd oversleep for school, Phil just put a finger to his lips, pointed significantly at one child beside him, and then shifted to make room for the other. Wilbur asked nothing, but squeezed his brother's hand as if he knew everything.

Techno woke up around noon, a bit confused and very embarrassed. He looked at Phil, lying on his back with the book held high so that Wilbur could follow the text with his eyes, inhaled loudly and immediately buried his flushed face in the pillow. Phil gave him a few minutes to deal with his emotions before putting his arm around him, pulling him closer.

Wilbur smiled, patting his brother on the shoulder in a slightly patronizing manner.

"Don't worry. I cried too when I finally understood."



Phil, by contrast, understood nothing at all. But maybe he didn't have to. Maybe that's why he didn't have enough time to adopt Wilbur earlier, and maybe that's why he had to wait so long to finally be able to say with all certainty that he had somehow managed to create a family. So that someone would understand it all for him.

\* \* \*

Nate was right about one thing - the whole procedure did go exactly as it should. Much slower than Phil wished, but he stopped caring about it as soon as he signed all the papers. He framed both the adoption certificates and hung them on the living room wall next to the family photos, while Wilbur jumped up beside him to see better.

"We're really twins now," he said, pointing to two identical dates in the corners of the pages. Techno just sighed heavily.

"I can't believe I'm stuck with you..." he muttered, but made no attempt to protest and just hummed in displeasure as Wilbur hung his weight on him.

"Yhm! You are. Forever!"

Phil stepped back to check that the frames were hanging neatly. 'Forever' sounded very good if anyone wanted to know his opinion. More than good. Just right.

Exactly as it should be right from the start.

## Chapter End Notes

Guys, guys! The Discord server is already here, so if you want to join - go on!

<https://discord.gg/UyaAUXYmhn>

Works inspired by this one

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